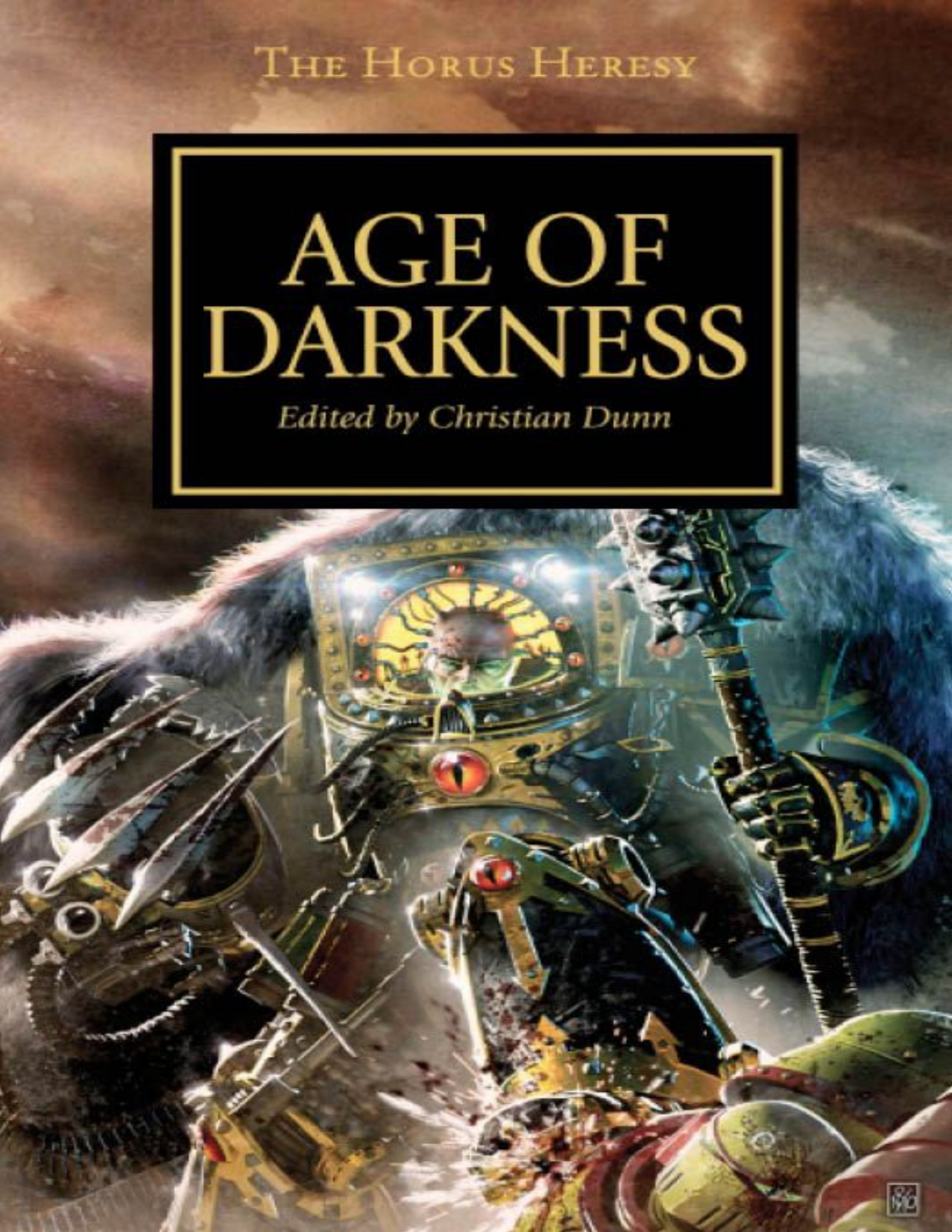
THE HORUS HERESY

AGE OF DARKNESS

Edited by Christian Dunn



VISIT…

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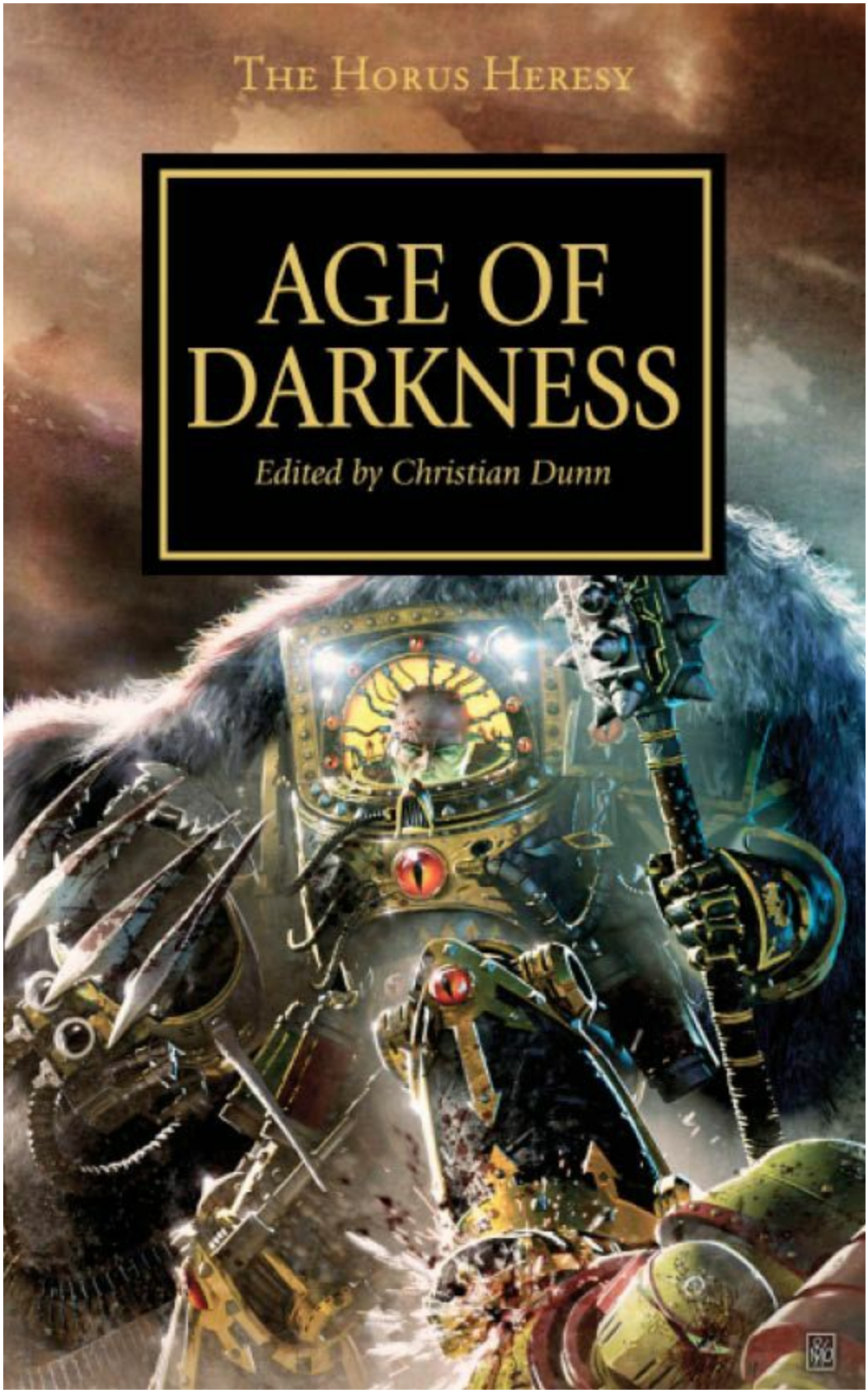

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THE HORUS HERESY

AGE OF DARKNESS

Edited by Christian Dunn

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The Horus Heresy

It is a time of legend.

Mighty heroes battle for the right to rule the galaxy. The vast armies of the Emperor of Earth have conquered the galaxy in a Great Crusade – the myriad alien races have been smashed by the Emperor's elite warriors and wiped from the face of history.

The dawn of a new age of supremacy for humanity beckons.

Gleaming citadels of marble and gold celebrate the many victories of the Emperor. Triumphs are raised on a million worlds to record the epic deeds of his most powerful and deadly warriors.

First and foremost amongst these are the primarchs, superheroic beings who have led the Emperor's armies of Space Marines in victory after victory. They are unstoppable and magnificent, the pinnacle of the Emperor's genetic experimentation. The Space Marines are the mightiest human warriors the galaxy has ever known, each capable of besting a hundred normal men or more in combat.

Organised into vast armies of tens of thousands called Legions, the Space Marines and their primarch leaders conquer the galaxy in the name of the Emperor.

Chief amongst the primarchs is Horus, called the Glorious, the Brightest Star, favourite of the Emperor, and like a son unto him. He is the Warmaster, the commander-in-chief of the Emperor's military might, subjugator of a thousand thousand worlds and conqueror of the galaxy. He is a warrior without peer, a diplomat supreme.

As the flames of war spread through the Imperium, mankind's champions will all be put to the ultimate test.

Rules of Engagement

Graham McNeill

He wanted to weep, but the last two years had turned his heart to stone. Too much had been asked of him, too much had been lost, and he had no more sorrow left. Brothers forsaken, a world of Ultramar burned and the golden dream of galactic unity reduced to ashes. Such a singular moment in history should be mourned. It demanded tears, a rending of clothes, a tearing of hair, or, at the very least, an outburst of primal rage.

He indulged none of these cathartic releases.

If he allowed tears of sorrow to fall, they might never stop.

The interior of the Arcanium was a twenty metre square cube with an arched doorway in each wall, softly lit by thick candles held aloft in iron sconces worked in the form of eagles and lions rampant. The floor was of a dark slate, and its walls were formed from bare timbers, polished and worked smooth by a plane wielded by his own hands. He remembered finding refuge here many years ago, when the incessant bickering between the senators of Macragge had become too unbearable for a boy who thrived on action and excitement.

That boy was gone now, drowned in the blood of Konor's murder and the greater tide of slaughter he had unleashed in the wake of that treachery. Once he had called it justice, but the passage of time gave him the perspective to recognise the truth of his motivation. Revenge was never a worthy reason to send men to war, and he had resolved to never again fall prey to its seductions. Having identified the flaw, he had taken steps to purge himself of that weakness, and the execution of Gallan had been the last time emotion guided his hand.

He returned his attention to the book before him, hearing the bustle of the fortress beyond the lovingly crafted walls of his private sanctum. Once this place had been remote from any petitioners, built hundreds of miles from the nearest settlement, but its isolation was now a thing of the past. Acres of marbled walls, glittering geodesic domes, soaring towers and perfectly proportioned structures surrounded it. An entire library had been raised up around the chamber, and though the architects and mathematicians had begged him to consider the harmonious geometry of the golden mean inherent within their plans, he had refused to allow the Arcanium to be demolished.

He wanted to smile, recognising that perhaps Gallan's execution hadn't quite been the last time emotion had played a part in his decision-making process after all. But the smile refused to come, and in the face of all that occupied his thoughts now, his determination to hang on to this fragment of his youth seemed a wilfully petty thing.

Seated at a heavy table of dark wood that filled the centre of the chamber, he read the words he had just written in the enormous tome before him. Its spine was a metre long and thick enough to enclose a book fully thirty centimetres deep. Brilliant gold leaf edged the warm leather binding, and the pages were pale vellum that still carried the scent of the beast from which it had been cut. Tightly wound script filled the leftmost page, each letter precisely formed and arranged in perfectly even lines of text.

The work was progressing, and every day brought him closer to completion.

It was to be his greatest work, his *Magnum Opus*, the undertaking for which he would be forever remembered. Some might consider such sentiment to be vanity on his part, but he knew better. This was a work that would save everything his gene-father had tried to build. Its teachings would form the foundation of what was needed to weather the coming storm. Selflessness, not pride, guided his hand as he set down decades of accumulated wisdom, each chapter and verse a fragment of his biologically encoded genius, each morsel of imparted knowledge a building block that would combine to form a work immeasurably greater than the sum of its parts.

In the wake of the devastation unleashed on Calth, the Legion was looking to him for leadership more than ever. His warriors had suffered a grievous blow to their pride, and desperately needed to see their primogenitor. Helots brought petitions for audiences from his Chapter captains every day, but this endeavour was too important to grant such requests.

They did not understand why he sequestered himself away from his sons, but they did not need to understand. All that was required of them was obedience, even when his orders made no sense and seemed as heretical as those that had set the galaxy ablaze.

In all his years of service to his gene-father, he had never faced so terrible a choice.

The Imperium was lost. Everything he knew told him so, and this betrayal was the one thing that would save the dream at its heart from extinction.

The body of the Imperium was dying, but the ideals of its foundation could live on.

His father would understand that, even if others would not.

Roboute Guilliman wrote two words at the top of the right-hand page: words of treachery, words of salvation. Words to herald a new beginning.

Imperium Secundus.

Engagement 94

His name was Remus Ventanus of the Ultramarines 4th Company, and he was a traitor.

This sat ill with him, but there was little he could do to change it. The orders came directly from the primarch, and if there was one thing drilled into Ultramarines from the earliest days of their training it was that orders were always obeyed, no matter what.

Intermittent flashes lit the mountains of Talassar with a scratchy, pale glow as bright streamers of fire dropped burning traceries like phosphor tears across the night sky. The retreat from Castra Publius had been long and gruelling, made more so by the relentless, dogged pursuit of their attackers. Like razorfins with the scent of blood in the water, the warriors of Mortarion never gave up, never let up the pressure and never, ever, stopped attacking once battle had been joined.

It was a trait Remus had once admired.

He had no idea how the war across the rest of Talassar went. All he knew was what the planners in the grand strategium fed him through his helmet, but they jealously guarded their secrets and were miserly when it came to distributing information.

Eighteenth Company had held Castra Publius to the last man, long enough for the remainder of the Ultramarines to escape, falling back to pre-prepared positions raised by helots, Talassar Defence Pioneers and the monstrous construction engines of the Mechanicum. Those engines were proving key to their strategy, and Remus was grateful the primarch had seen fit to demand a permanent presence of the Martian priesthood on each world of Ultramar before the Red Planet had fallen to the Warmaster's allies.

Remus pushed himself to his feet and lifted his bolter from the rocks beside him. He ran through the readiness checks and snapped home the safety, the action so ingrained it was automatic. Just like everything a warrior of the XIII Legion did. He clamped the weapon to his thigh and looked out over the landscape around him.

The mountains of Talassar snaked across the planet's single continent like a buckled spine, each vertebra a gnarled peak and each gap a series of corrugated valleys with hairline fractures that penetrated deep into the rock to form hidden valleys, dead-end grabens and narrow gorges whose floors never saw sunlight. It was terrain to favour the defenders, and every scenario of invasion relied upon the mountainous bulwark and its linked fortresses.

What those scenarios hadn't counted on was a foe as implacable as the Death Guard.

An angled wall of compacted rubble and rapid-setting rockcrete sealed this particular valley with a series of fortified redoubts and strongpoints. Remus was no stranger to the speed and completeness with which the Mechanicum could sculpt landscapes, yet the sight before him was still incredible.

The valley had grown wider and deeper, its flanks blasted, excavated, drilled and dug out to form the linked series of earthworks that spanned its width. He and the 4th Company had deployed from here less than half a day ago, when the valley floor had been smooth and empty, and the black, volcanic walls were coloured by hardy lichen and projecting evergreen firs. All that was gone; the once verdant highland valley now resembled a quarry that had been worked for decades. Talassar Auxilia units manned artfully wrought redoubts formed from pre-stressed slabs, and Ultramarines heavy guns occupied revetments that hadn't been there ten hours ago.

It had been a hard retreat, with the forward units of the Death Guard harrying them every step of the way. Remus had balked at the idea of allowing the enemy to maintain the initiative, but the new doctrine required them to give ground.

Gathered in carefully placed groups, the three thousand Legiones Astartes of the 4th Company took their rest behind the high wall, and Remus threaded his way through them. He shivered as he passed beneath the shadow of one of the Mechanicum's construction engines. It towered over him, longer and wider than the Gallery of Swords on Macragge; and set the earth trembling with the low bass note of its mighty engine core. Its enormous bulk was a dusty ochre colour, studded with weapon mounts, striped with hazard chevrons and stamped with monochrome representations of the Cog Mechanicum.

His warriors were deployed behind the wall, each squad placed exactly according to the new tactical doctrines recently put in place. As part of a radical shake-up of the way the Legion was organised, a series of new regulations and orders of battle had come down from the Fortress of Hera, imposing strict guidelines upon how each warrior and squad operated within the Legion as a whole. It felt strange to devolve command autonomy to a set of predetermined strictures, but if there was anyone who could devise a tactical doctrine to meet any foe and any situation, it was Roboute Guilliman.

He saw Sergeant Barkha at the steps leading to the fighting platform, listening to the reports from the 4th Company Scouts on the cliffs above. Of all the warriors of the Ultramarines, these warriors had the toughest time adapting to imposed rules, but such was the comprehensive nature of their new operating procedures that even the 4th Company's irascible Head Scout, Naron Vattian, was finding it near impossible to find fault with them.

'Any sign yet, sergeant?' asked Remus.

Barkha turned and hammered his fist to his chest, the pre-Unity salute. It felt strange to see his sergeant make such a gesture, but Remus supposed it was more appropriate than the aquila, given that they were now traitors.

'Lots of activity around Castra Publius, but no sign yet that they're on their way,' said Barkha, his hands now ramrod straight at his side, as though he stood on a parade ground instead of a battlefield.

'We're not on Macragge, sergeant,' said Remus. 'No need for such arch formality.'

Barkha nodded, but his stance remained unchanged.

'Standards, captain,' replied the sergeant. 'Just because we're on a war footing is no reason to let them slip. That's how this mess began after all. Standards slipped. Won't happen on my watch.'

‘Is that a rebuke?’ said Remus, wiping the coarse black dust of the mountains from the azure surfaces of his battle-plate.

‘No, sir,’ replied Barkha, staring at a point over his right shoulder. ‘Simply a fact.’

‘You’re absolutely right, sergeant,’ said Remus. ‘If only the Warmaster had been attended by a naysmith like you, then this could all have been avoided.’

‘I was being serious, captain,’ said Barkha.

‘So was I,’ replied Remus, climbing the steps to the ramparts and casting his gaze down the mountains. Barkha dutifully followed him and stood at his side, ready to enact whatever order he gave. Though Remus couldn’t see them, he knew Death Guard units were probing the lower valleys, seeking the weakness in the Ultramarines defence line.

‘I’m no engineer, but even I can see we won’t hold this wall,’ said Barkha.

‘Why do you say that?’

‘They’ve built the wall too far out. The narrowest part of the valley is behind us.’

‘And?’

‘That’s made the wall too long,’ said Barkha, as though unable to comprehend how his captain couldn’t see what was so obvious to him. ‘We don’t have enough warriors or heavy guns to repel a serious assault.’

Barkha gestured over his shoulder. ‘Yaelen’s Gorge is to the south, but it’s too narrow to move heavy armour at any speed. Castra Maestor blocks the Helican Stairs to the north. This is the only viable route through our line, and the Death Guard will see that swiftly enough.’

‘All of what you say is true, sergeant,’ said Remus. ‘Do you have a point?’

‘Of course. It’s almost like you *want* them to attack here. What I don’t understand is why we are letting them when we should be taking the fight to them.’

‘The Death Guard advance like a surge tide,’ said Remus. ‘If we meet them head on, their strength will sweep us away. But we pull back, drawing them ever onwards until they are thin and spent. *Then* we will strike them.’

‘This is your plan?’

‘No,’ said Remus. ‘It is our strategy as decreed by the primarch’s writings.’

‘Permission to speak freely, captain?’ asked Barkha.

‘Granted.’

‘Are we really going to play this out basing our tactics on a book?’

‘The primarch’s book,’ Remus reminded him.

‘I know, and I mean no disrespect by these questions, but can any book – even one written by a primarch – cover *every* tactical eventuality?’

‘I suppose we are about to find out,’ said Remus, as he heard chatter over the vox.

Death Guard units were moving into the lower reaches of the valley.

‘Stand the men to arms, sergeant,’ ordered Remus.

‘Aye, captain,’ said Barkha. He saluted and turned to get the 4th Company moving.

Remus Ventanus stared off into the distance, seeing a glitter of fires from further down the mountains. Castra Publius was gone, Ultramarines were being lost and the Death Guard were coming to destroy them.

How had it come to this?

The Death Guard attacked fifty-two minutes later, a brutal assault spearheaded by heavy armour and Dreadnoughts. It was a mailed fist, calculated to bludgeon the defenders into insensibility before the follow-up punch slammed home to complete their destruction. Mechanised infantry squads rumbled forwards in the wake of olive-painted Land Raiders that hurled incandescent bolts at the defenders. Disciplined phalanxes of warriors armoured in the same livery deployed from the armoured transports and began their inexorable advance upon the Ultramarines position.

Laser fire and bolters hammered the advancing warriors, punching holes in the advance but slowing it not at all. What little artillery they had dropped specially manufactured munitions into the enemy ranks, felling enemy squads in shrieks of light and sound. Enemy Dreadnoughts waded into the fight, weaponised arms sawing through the defenders with machine-like precision and lethality.

Remus saw an entire squad of Ultramarines put down by two Dreadnoughts working in concert, and bellowed to his one remaining heavy weapons team to take them out. A trio of missiles leapt towards the Dreadnoughts, and one fell silent as it was struck in the flank by two warheads. The second was dealt with moments later as a multi-melta scored a direct hit on its sarcophagus.

These were fleeting victories, bright moments in the face of overwhelming odds. The Death Guard fought like machines, driving forwards with the unthinking, unfeeling ardour of something soulless and mechanical. Remus was a warrior, a gene-crafted killer of superlative ability, but he had been created to be so much more than that. He took pride in his abilities as a warrior, relishing the chance to match his skill against another, but to see the Death Guard at war was to face an opponent to whom war was simply attrition.

But Remus had no intention of dancing to the Death Guard’s war drums.

Tactical feeds flickered and scrolled on his visor, casualty rates, kill-ratios, projected outcomes, and a dozen other battlefield variables. The flow of information would have left even an augmented Imperial Army Tacticus overwhelmed, but Remus’s genhanced cognitive architecture processed it in the time it took to blink.

As the Death Guard regrouped for another assault on the walls, Remus's eidetic memory accessed the parameters of battle as contained in the primarch's tactical schematics. He found a match, following the logic path through its predetermined courses of action. Now was the time to pull back.

Remus clamped his bolter to his thigh and issued the withdrawal order, one of two dozen permitted options available to him. With smooth precision, the Ultramarines began falling back by squads as the Talassar Auxilia filled the killing ground before the wall with las-fire. The Mechanicum engine, though not designed as a war machine, was nevertheless equipped with a fearsome array of defensive weaponry. As its enormous treads ground it away from the battle, the barking roar of its close-in guns ripped overhead, the sound strangely flat and without the usual percussive banging of massed bolters. Artillery pieces launched a last volley over the walls before turning and racing up the winding road through the mountains.

Remus turned and dropped from the wall, joining Sergeant Barkha and the depleted ranks of his command squad. Ithus, Helika and Pilus were gone, which left his squad dangerously under strength, but the primarch's writings had considered such an eventuality, and Remus acquired replacements from those squads who had come through the fighting unscathed.

Behind them, the Death Guard finally reached the wall, forcing their way over it as the defenders made their escape. As the Ultramarines crested the ridge behind the wall, Remus sent a coded burst transmission to the Mechanicum adept in the gargantuan construction engine. Seconds later, a controlled series of detonations brought down the valley walls in a thunderous avalanche. It was little more than a delaying tactic. The Death Guard would break through before long, but it was enough for now.

Barkha nodded to him as they retreated into the mountains.

'We're running out of room,' said Barkha. 'You think we've done enough to break them against the walls of Castra Tanagra?'

Remus didn't answer right away. The tactical plots of kill-to-casualty ratios were scrolling down his screen. It made for grim reading, but they were still within the parameters set by the predicted conditions of the engagement. Overviews from the grand strategium filtered through the tactical information, revealing the extent to which the Death Guard had been bled white by constantly hammering the Ultramarines fortifications.

'It looks like it,' he replied. 'The other Chapters have done well.'

'Not as well as us, though?' asked Barkha.

'No, not as well as us,' said Remus. 'No one outdoes the *Troublesome Fourth*, eh?'

'Not on my watch,' agreed Barkha.

Remus liked the heart his sergeant displayed, pleased to hear such proud aggression in the warrior's voice. It seemed the primarch's purely doctrinal approach to war was holding up to the vagaries of battle.

But this was simply one fight, and one opponent of many ranged against them.

The real tests would come later.

Engagement 136

The holo-pict projected above the glossy surface of the plotter cast a stark light around the grand strategium. It folded sharp shadows around the gleaming walls and bleached deeply tanned faces of colour. The air was thick and close, redolent with the toxic oils and caustic unguents smouldering in the Mechanicum's censers. It smelled of engine oil mixed with at least a dozen poisonous elements, and though it was Mechanicum witchery, it was certainly effective. The Legiones Astartes endured these effluvia without effect, but the mortals within the grand strategium coughed and rubbed eyes that constantly streamed with tears.

Remus Ventanus didn't know if they were tears engendered by the petrochemical irritants in the burners or the sight of so beautiful a world being destroyed. A measure of both, he surmised.

He stared at the desolation of Prandium and wanted to weep. The most beautiful world of Ultramar by any reckoning, its wondrous forests, sculpted mountains and shimmering lakes were either burning or wreathed in smoke and choked with pollutants.

Never afraid of extreme measures, Angron had let slip his World Eaters in the most vicious way imaginable. Remus had once heard his primarch say that Angron's Legion could succeed where all others would fail because the Red Angel was willing to go further than any other Legion, to countenance behaviour that any civilised code of war would deem abhorrent.

Seeing what had been done to Prandium, Remus understood completely.

This was no honourable war, this was butchery and destruction embodied. The primarch's great work could surely never have contemplated war with so terrible a face.

The World Eaters had dropped on Prandium after a punishing saturation bombardment that levelled most of its great cities and set the world ablaze from pole to pole. In truth, there was little worth saving. Millions of people were dead and the detonations of volatile munitions had polluted the atmosphere and seas for millennia to come.

Yet Prandium was still valuable. Its orbital track passed close to the coreward jump-point, meaning that whoever controlled Prandium could control entry to Ultramar. Even if Prandium was reduced to a barren, lifeless rock, it was still a world of Ultramar, and nowhere trod by Roboute Guilliman would be surrendered without a fight.

Coming so soon after the devastation wrought on Calth's sun, it seemed to Remus that their worlds were being torn apart piece by piece. Like an ancient, crumbling standard removed from its stasis vault in the Fortress of Hera, the warp and weft of Ultramar's fabric

was coming undone. Alone among the many savage assaults tearing at the Ultramarines empire, the invasion of Talassar had been repulsed. Driven on by their apparent success, Mortarion's warriors had over-extended their forces and been left dangerously exposed when they finally hurled themselves at the mountain fastness of Castra Tanagra.

Elements of the 4th, 9th and 45th Companies had garrisoned the fortress, and as the Death Guard attacked, the encircling horns of the 49th, 34th, 20th and 1st Companies drew in and completed the destruction. It had been an uplifting moment, yet Remus could not see how something similar could be done here.

Surrounding the plotter, their faces grim and carved from granite, were the captains of fourteen of the Ultramarines battle companies, together with their lieutenants, senior sergeants and savants. Battle-logisters pumped information into the plotter, real-time strategic data that depicted a world torn apart by war.

A world dying before their very eyes.

'Fifth Company manoeuvring into position,' said Captain Honoria of the 23rd. 'Seventeenth moving in support.'

'Enemy forces engaging the Twenty-fifth,' said Urath of the 39th.

'Eastern flank of Adapolis is folding,' commented Evexian of the 7th. 'They'll break through in a matter of hours. I'm ordering the Forty-third and the Thirty-seventh to fall back.'

'Are the Thirteenth and Twenty-eighth in position to meet the northern push?' asked Remus.

'They are,' confirmed Honoria. 'World Eaters Third, Fifth and Ninth are pushing hard at the borders of Zaragossa Province. If we don't send in reinforcements, we could lose the entire western flank.'

Remus circled the plotter with his hands behind his back, looking for some flaw in Angron's battle plan. As senior captain in the grand strategium, he had overall command of Ultramarines forces on Prandium, a level of command he had never before held, but the primarch himself had made the appointment.

Why had he been chosen? There were others in the grand strategium with more experience. Since Talassar, Remus and the 4th Company had fought dozens of smaller actions, each time emerging victorious, but each of them had been a company-level engagement, with no more than a few thousand warriors at his command.

This was another strata of warfare entirely. To command the defences of an entire world was something that Remus had, of course, trained for but never actually done. The primarch's teachings were indelibly etched on his mind: options, variables, parameters, action paths, outcome responses and a thousand detailed plans covering every possible eventuality of war.

It had worked on Talassar, and Remus had to trust that it would work here.

He stepped up to the tactical plotter and took in the strategic overview in a heartbeat. The motion of armies, divisions and cohorts – a thousand elements of planetary warfare – was a spider's web of furious advances, flank marches, brutal battles and encirclements. At Pardusia, the 19th Company had been all but destroyed, and the World Eaters had powered north through the wastelands of what had once been ornamental pasturelands where wild horses had roamed freely and rare flora, virtually extinct in Ultramar, had again bloomed in glorious bursts of kaleidoscopic colour.

The assembled captains glared at him, resentful at sending their brothers to die following orders that broke the cohesion of the Ultramarines defence lines. Arcs and lines of blue snaked across the map at random, each one an isolated bastion of Ultramarines, Defence Auxilia and requisitioned Imperial Army units.

'What are your orders, Captain Ventanus?' demanded Captain Honoria.

Remus stared at the map, feeding the current situation through the filters of the primarch's work. Orders presented themselves to him, but they made no sense. He checked his conclusions again, knowing they were correct, but checking them anyway.

'Order the Twenty-fifth and the Seventh to realign their frontage,' ordered Ventanus. 'The Seventeenth is to halt and hold position.'

'But the Fifth,' protested Urath. 'They'll be cut off without the Seventeenth covering their flank.'

'Do it,' said Remus.

'You will condemn those warriors to die needlessly,' said Honoria, gripping the side of the plotter tightly. 'I cannot stand by and watch you lose this world and our Legion's best and bravest with such insanity.'

'Are you questioning my orders?' asked Ventanus.

'You're damn right I am,' snapped Honoria, before remembering himself. The captain of the 23rd took a deep breath. 'I know what you did on Calth, Remus. Damn it, we all respect you for that, and I know you have the primarch's ear. He has his eye on you for great things, I know that, but this is madness. Surely you must see that?'

'Question my orders and you question the primarch,' said Remus softly. 'Is that really a stance you wish to take, Honoria?'

'I question nothing, Remus,' said Honoria guardedly. He swept his hand out to encompass the disastrous tactical situation on the projection of Prandium. 'But how can those manoeuvres halt the World Eaters? The Red Angel's butchers are gutting Prandium, and you are helping them to do it.'

Remus held his tongue. For all that he agreed with Honoria's sentiments, he had to trust that the primarch knew what he was doing. To try and understand the workings of a mind crafted by the genetic mastery of the Emperor was as close to unattainable as it was possible to be. The leaps of imagination, intuition and logic the primarch of the Ultramarines could make were unreachable to anyone save another primarch. And even then, Remus doubted any of Roboute Guilliman's brothers could match his grand strategic vision.

Yet what he had devised and passed down to them would only work if every cog in the machine was turning in the same direction. Honoria, for all his courage and honour, was twisting the machine's workings. And that couldn't be allowed. Not now.

'You are relieved of command, Honoria,' said Remus. 'Remove yourself from this post and have your lieutenant step up.'

‘Ventanus, wait–’ began Evexian.

‘You wish to align with Honoria?’ said Remus.

‘No, Captain Ventanus,’ said Evexian with a curt bow. ‘But even you must admit that your orders appear somewhat… contradictory. You know this, I can see it in your eyes.’

‘All I need to know is that my orders bear the authority of the primarch,’ said Remus. ‘Do any of you believe you know better than our progenitor? Can any of you say that you have a better grasp of the nuances of war than our sire?’

Silence provided Remus with all the answer he needed.

‘Then carry out my orders,’ he said.

Prandium burned. Smaller Ultramarines icons winked out as they were destroyed, and the angry red icons of the World Eaters slowly broke apart like ripples of blood. No part of Prandium was left unscathed. The beautiful wild woods of the southern provinces were ashen, atomic wastelands, the crystal mountains of the east irradiated with toxic fallout that would take thousands of years to dissipate. Glorious cities of soaring gold and silver marble had fallen to ruin, pounded to rubble by orbital barrages that wiped them from the face of the world as if they had never existed.

What had begun as a worldwide conflict had degenerated into a thousand or more scrappy brushfire wars waged between isolated battle groups. Ultramarines forces fought within a few miles of one another, but might as well have been on different worlds for all the support they could provide to one another.

Remus felt as though he was sinking fast, already regretting his decision to remove Honoria from the command echelons of the grand strategium. Hadn’t he spoken of the value of a naysmith with Barkha? Didn’t every leader need a voice of dissent at his ear to force him to question his decisions?

He searched the tactical plot for any sign of hope, wondering where he had gone wrong. What could he have done differently? What aspect of his primarch’s teachings had he failed to heed? He had reacted to every development with a rigorous application of the new doctrines, yet Prandium was on the verge of being lost forever.

‘Push the Thirteenth forward,’ he said, as automatic memory called up yet more of the primarch’s lessons. ‘Bolster the Seventeenth, and order the Eleventh to reform to flank the World Eaters advancing on Thardonis. Advance to contact and pin them in place.’

‘So ordered,’ replied Urath.

‘Order the Eighth Battle Group to withdraw to the borders of Ixian Province. Mechanicum units to cover and pioneers to establish temporary fortifications,’ said Remus as yet more tactical variables fed into his precise recall. A pattern emerged, and Remus began to appreciate just how tenuous the World Eaters position was. It had cost blood and lives to bring them to this point, but only now did Remus see how delicately balanced this grand strategy had been.

‘To win the greatest victory, one must take the greatest risks,’ the primarch had told him on the rad-wastes of Calth.

‘You never take risks,’ countered Remus.

‘Not that you would know,’ replied Guilliman.

As the myriad situational variables displayed on the plotter flooded into the processing centres of Remus’s consciousness, the answers and manoeuvres required leapt to the forefront of his brain. He had heard it said that the greatest generals were those who made the fewest mistakes, but that was nonsense of the highest order. The greatest generals were those who planned for every eventuality and knew *exactly* how their foes would fight. Seeing the breathtaking beauty and complexity of the stratagems unfolding in his mind, he knew without a doubt that Roboute Guilliman was just such a general.

The words virtually said themselves, using him as their conduit to life.

‘Order Battlegroup Ultima to realign its frontage along the River Axiana,’ he said. ‘Ninth and Twenty-fifth to alter the direction of their advance. North-east to grid reference six-nine-alpha/eight-three-delta.’

The captains followed his orders without question, but Remus wasn’t done. Orders poured from him, each one spat like a poisoned dart into the heart of the enemy commander. His subordinates could barely keep up with him as he sent manoeuvre orders into the field with breathtaking rapidity. Confusion lit every face, but as the worldwide stance of the Ultramarines armies began to realign and enact Remus’s orders, he watched those same faces transform into expressions of wonderment.

In the centre of the Praxos Territories, a cluster of red icons, representing one of the main World Eater battlegroups, now found itself surrounded on all sides as previously isolated Ultramarines units merged and swung around like closing gates to trap it within a deadly killing zone. Within minutes those icons were winking out as the combined firepower of three Ultramarines battle companies flensed the region with artillery, massed bolters and overlapping fields of fire from cunningly positioned Devastators.

All across Prandium, World Eater cohorts were suddenly surrounded and cut off from one another as their hot-blooded aggression pushed them straight into the Ultramarines guns. The effect was akin to a million dominos ranked up in seemingly random patterns that tumbled together to create a masterpiece of kinetic energy at work. Ultramarines companies that had been in full retreat swung around to link with their brothers to seal the World Eaters in deadly traps from which there was no escape.

Like the most graceful ballet, the Ultramarines danced to the tune of Remus’s commands, working together in flawless harmony: an elegantly and perfectly designed killing machine. One by one, the red icons of the invaders winked out, while those of the Ultramarines remained a steady blue. Casualty indicators began dropping, until eventually falling to zero. And the World Eaters continued to die.

Within an hour, the battles were over and Prandium was saved.

‘I don’t believe it,’ whispered Urath as reports of secure battlefields chimed in from all across the ravaged world.

‘It doesn’t seem possible,’ breathed Evexian. ‘So fast, so merciless.’

In truth, Remus was having a hard time believing the end had come so swiftly. It was one thing to have trust in the primarch’s vision for his great work, quite another to see it in action.

‘What’s our operational effectiveness level?’ asked Remus.

His captains hurried to collate the information, filtering in reports from the field, casualty reports, ammo expenditure levels and unit degradation ratios. Reports streamed across the plotter, a few in red, fewer in orange, but the majority in a healthy green. Urath summed up the incoming flow of information, but Remus needed no interpretation of the data, the visual results were clear enough.

‘Seventy-seven per cent of units in the field report immediate battlefield effectiveness,’ said Urath. ‘Eight per cent are at minimum or unsafe levels of readiness, and a further thirteen per cent are at dangerous threshold levels of unit effectiveness. Only two per cent are combat ineffective.’

‘If I hadn’t seen it for myself…’ said Evexian, voicing the thoughts of them all.

‘And this all came from the primarch’s work?’ said Urath.

‘Did you ever doubt it?’ asked Remus.

‘Damn me, but I wondered for a moment, Remus,’ replied Urath, wiping the sweat from his brow. ‘Reprimand me if you must, but I feared Prandium was lost. Along with much of the Legion.’

‘Prandium might as well be lost,’ said Evexian bitterly. ‘Look at what those murderous bastards did to the Fair Maiden of Ultramar. How could any planet recover from such an ordeal?’

‘Worlds of Ultramar are stronger than most, Evexian,’ said Remus, letting out a long breath and smiling at the victory he had just won. ‘Prandium can recover from this and bloom even more beautiful than before. Trust me, it would take more than Angron’s butchers to snuff out her radiance.’

Engagement 228

‘I don’t like this,’ said Sergeant Barkha. ‘Feels like we’re flying in a rations can. I could spit through this fuselage.’

‘You can spit acid,’ Remus reminded him. ‘There aren’t many hulls or fuselages you *couldn’t* put a hole in with your saliva.’

‘You know what I mean.’

‘I do, but I wouldn’t worry. The Thunderhawk is just a stopgap design. It won’t be around for long.’

‘Good,’ said Barkha, looking around the crude, factory-stamped interior of the rolling gunship. Its metal ribs were exposed and the wiring guts of the aircraft were visible in tag-tied bundles of cabling that snaked from one end of the boxy fuselage to the other. Ultramar was far from the centres of Mechanicum forge-worlds, and the XIII Legion had only recently taken delivery of a fleet of the new gunships. It irked Remus to see the hasty work, the shoddy specifications and unprofessional workmanship that had gone into the design and construction of the aircraft.

No craftsman had deemed the design worthy of attaching his name, and Remus wasn’t surprised. This aircraft had all the hallmarks of servitor-assembled work, and that he was forced to trust his life to it didn’t make him feel any better. The stamp of the Mechanicum was acid-etched onto the bulkhead beside him, and Remus touched it for good luck.

‘I saw that,’ said Barkha. ‘Superstitious are you?’

The question was lightly asked, but Remus heard the warning behind it, the suggestion that his answer should be carefully chosen. Barkha would be quite within his rights to condemn his superior officer for conduct unbecoming an Ultramarines warrior. Even now, in the midst of a combat situation.

Especially now.

‘No, but I take reassurance from the fact they believe in this machine enough to mark it with their seal.’

‘It’s probably the only thing holding it together,’ observed Barkha as the gunship banked around one of the sun-baked agri-silos of Quintarn. Spars of light from the vision blocks inset in the gunship’s fuselage swayed with the motion, and Remus felt something shear from the underside of the craft. Impact or system failure? His heart lurched as the gunship dropped, its wings passing within a metre of the silver-skinned silo.

‘Target ahead,’ came a voice over the internal vox, sounding strained with the effort of holding the bucking craft steady. The timbre of the pilot’s voice told Remus exactly what the crew of this new craft made of it. A Stormbird had weight behind it, a solidity that made it a pleasure to fly and a safely cocooned means of transporting the killer Legionaries where they needed to be.

Remus linked his helmet’s inloaders with the forward picters mounted in the gunship’s prow, seeing the pristine symmetry of Idrisia, one of the most central of the great agricultural hydropolis cities of Quintarn. Though given over to the utilitarian need for crops and industry, the city was still beautiful in its own way, with majestic towers, pillared hangars and marble-fronted meeting halls. Its street plan overlaid his vision, a masterful arrangement of function and aesthetic. Like most things in Ultramar, the primarch had turned his genius to the design and layout of its cities.

Too bad he hadn’t turned it to the design of this gunship.

Enemy strongpoints within the city were marked in red, and Remus saw how deeply they had sunk their fiery claws into the

metropolis. City fighting was where this particular enemy excelled, with a propensity for weaponry that functioned best at short to mid range and could burn through cover as though it didn't exist.

This would be the most testing battle yet. The others had driven them to the point of defeat before the primarch's great work had proved its worth. It had done so time and time again, in engagement after engagement. The 4th Company was by no means the only company now armed with their primarch's incredible achievement. Even as the 4th Company's aerial assault drew closer to its target, other companies were engaged in varied theatres of war with the enemy on Quintarn.

But Remus felt sure that he and his warriors were the ones who would be watched the closest to see whether its teachings would embed in their psyche.

In some circles they were known as the *Troublesome Fourth*, a company known for its daredevil actions, heroic follies and the personal bravery of its individual warriors. If the primarch's work could be made to stick with the 4th Company, then it would stick anywhere.

And after Calth…

Where the 4th Company led, the other battle companies followed.

Remus switched out of his tactical view as the gunship juddered and the pilot jinked it to the side in a series of gut-wrenching evasion manoeuvres. The ready light above the forward assault ramp flashed from red to green and Remus slammed his palm against the gravity harness. The restraint lifted up and over his head, and he retrieved his bolter from the niche beside him. The Thunderhawk might be a ramshackle piece of junk, but it had cleverly designed stowage that at least made it functional.

'Fourth!' yelled Remus. 'Touchdown in fifteen seconds.'

Thirty warriors filled the interior of the Thunderhawk, a force capable of meeting most enemy forces with a high degree of certainty that they would destroy it. Yet it felt strange to Remus to be going into battle without at least fifty warriors at his back. Warfare wasn't about being fair or acknowledging the honour of your opponent, it was about crushing him into the dust with overwhelming force. Few enemies would survive the attention of fifty warriors of the Ultramarines.

True, not many would survive an attack by thirty, but the point still rankled.

Remus took his place at the front of the assault ramp, as the pitch of the gunship's engines changed and the pilot brought it to a shrieking hover. The ramp dropped and the dry heat of scorched stone and hot metal filled the compartment. As powerful as those smells were, they couldn't compete with the reek of synthetic fertilisers, chemical soil additives, the rich scent of turned earth and thousands of acres of crops. Remus charged out, his warriors forming up in perfectly aligned squads to either side of him. They spread out, keeping low to avoid the searing jetwash from the Thunderhawk.

They were on a roof, seared black and reeking of burning propellant. Green-armoured bodies lay unmoving at the roof parapets, and Remus saw numerous missile tubes amid the clusters of the fallen.

'Good landing kills,' said Barkha, following his gaze.

'True,' replied Remus. He hadn't felt the Thunderhawk's nose guns firing, but supposed that was only natural. To effect an assault drop in a hot landing zone was a difficult and risky manoeuvre, but the guns of the Thunderhawk had efficiently cleared their insertion point of hostiles. He almost pulled up short at that last thought. It had been easy enough to submerge himself in the immediacy of his previous engagements, but this operation was very different.

'Something the matter, captain?' asked Barkha. 'We need to keep moving. We've caught them by surprise, but that won't last.'

'I'm fine,' Remus assured him, taking a last look at the bodies and shaking his head. The unthinkable had become a very real threat, and it was beholden to him to keep what was at stake in mind at all times. The nature of the opponent didn't matter. All that mattered was the outcome. The Ultramarines had to fight, and they had to win.

The stakes had never been higher.

Victory ensured the survival of the most precious thing in the galaxy.

Defeat would see it snuffed out forever, never to be seen again.

Remus shook off thoughts that had no bearing on this fight. He was a captain of the Ultramarines and had a job to do. The enemy command post was located in this structure, and taking it out was key to the primarch's overall strategy. Weeks of probing, cipher-breaking and after-action interpretation had allowed Ultramarines strategic planners to plot the most probable deployments of the enemy command and control elements. With the war for Quintarn still hanging in the balance, the time to make use of that predictive intelligence had arrived.

As armoured elements engaged the leading edge of the dug-in defenders, Remus led his thirty warriors in a precise strike to decapitate the enemy command structure. Intercepted code transmissions indicated that the senior enemy commander was in theatre and this was too good an opportunity to pass up.

Remus knew the layout of this structure intimately, and led his warriors towards the armoured blockhouse that contained the stairwell to the upper cloister. He kept low and hugged the parapet, his bolter aimed at the door. It didn't make sense for the enemy to venture out, but these weren't Ultramarines. Who could say how recklessly they would behave?

He paused by a series of raised compression pipes, the metal hot to the touch and dripping with condensate. His warriors were moving into position, ready to assault the blockhouse, and he took a moment to glance over the angled parapet at the roof's edge.

The city stretched out around him, its metal-skinned towers and gleaming silos shining like silver beneath the beating sun. The Ultramarines quickly formed a perimeter as the gunship lifted off in a howl of engines that sounded like its namesake, and Remus watched as it peeled away, moving into formation with two-dozen others. Rippling beams of light lashed up from the ground towards the

aircraft. Concealed batteries flayed the sky and half a dozen Thunderhawks were struck, each one falling out of formation and describing sinuous arcs towards the ground.

Remus didn't watch them fall, but pressed on towards the blockhouse mounted in the centre of the roof. Its door was armoured and no doubt sealed, but it would present no challenge to his assault team. No orders needed to be given. He had briefed his warriors prior to dust-off, and each man was aware of his role. Not only that, but following the prescriptions of the primarch's great work, each man knew the role of every one of his brothers. Should any man fall, another of his brothers could take up his responsibilities.

He moved forwards at speed, his bolter pulled tight into his shoulder. He could hear the sounds of fighting coming from other buildings: the sharp bangs of bolters and the *whoosh-roar* of enemy flame units. Remus felt his lip curl in a sneer. Such weapons might scare xenos forces, but held little fear for warriors armoured in the finest battle-plate forged by the weapon-masters of Macragge.

Sergeant Archo and Brother Pilera ran to the armoured door. With practiced swiftness they rigged the hinges and lock with krak charges. Det-cord unspooled from their gauntlets as they took position to either side. At a nod from Remus, a silent data-squirt blew the charges and the door bulged inwards, as though struck by an invisible fist of colossal dimensions. Remus and Barkha ran forwards and thundered their boots against the door. The metal buckled, folded nearly in two by the awesome force.

The twisted door toppled inwards, and before it had landed, another two Ultramarines hurled a handful of grenades through the smoking hole. Rippling detonations, curiously muted, like a string of firecrackers, echoed up from below. Barkha stepped towards the ruined frame, but Remus held up a fist, holding his warriors in place.

A liquid jet of flame roiled up from within the blockhouse, bellowing with seething power as it licked up the stairs beyond the door. The blaze erupted from the door, but before the weapon could fire again, Remus nodded to Barkha. His sergeant swung around the door and loosed a barrage of bolter fire on full auto down the stairs. The noise was deafening, the booming reports echoing madly around the interior of the stairwell and lighting it with strobing flashes.

Barkha pounded down the stairs and his squad followed him down. Remus led the second squad down, as Sergeant Archo formed his warriors behind him. The interior of the stairwell was blackened and scorched, like the flue of a volcano.

Should make the bastards feel right at home, thought Remus.

He emerged from the stairs into a wide cloister that ran around the inner faces of the structure. The building itself was a hollow rectangle with an interior courtyard, fifty metres wide and a hundred long. Gunfire snapped and banged from below, the enemy desperately trying to reorganise and realign their defences. Remus saw three command tanks – two Rhinos and a Land Raider – each with a forest of whip antenna bristling on its topside. The armoured vehicles were painted a drab green with black draconic heads embossed on their side doors.

'Archo, sweep left, Barkha, go right!' he shouted.

The words were unnecessary; both men knew exactly what to do. They had read the primarch's treatise on such storming actions, and needed no input from him. Green-armoured warriors emerged from chambers further along the cloister, guns levelled, but they were already too late.

The Ultramarines filled the space with shots, putting down such a weight of fire that even artificer-crafted battle-plate couldn't withstand it for long. Remus fired his bolter on the move, compensating for the additional weight on the underside of his barrel. He automatically braced his shoulders for recoil, before remembering there was no need. The two warriors before him fell back, one toppling over the balustrade into the courtyard below, the other dropping with altogether less theatrics.

Remus knelt beside the body, studying the armour and its iconography. Jagged-toothed dragons emblazoned upon fields of fire combined with hammer and forge symbols to create an earthy, Promethean feel. Too feral, too *cultish* to be Imperial. It had the look of a savage culture raised up to civilisation, but which would never really be civilised.

Salamanders. Even the name sounded barbarous. A Legion named for the legendary fire-breathing monsters of a forgotten age. The name had no gravitas, and Remus shook his head at its primitive, visceral nature.

'How does it feel to die knowing you are my enemy?' Remus asked the fallen Salamander.

'No different than when I died as your brother,' said the warrior, before his head rolled to the side.

Remus nodded, and paid the warrior no more attention.

His visor changed to display the tactical situation. His warriors had swept through the upper reaches of the building, and were fighting their way to the lower level. The suddenness of their assault had caught the Salamanders off-guard, but there was still some fight left in these fire-loving cultists. Remus matched the ongoing status of the fight into his perfect recall of the primarch's works, and immediately saw how they were going to break the defences open.

'Sergeants,' said Remus. 'The north stair is ready to fall. Archo, I want your squad on the south cloister. Lay down suppressing fire on those tanks and the warriors in the courtyard. Barkha, you and I will break in through the north while Archo keeps their heads down.'

'Understood,' said Sergeant Archo. 'Moving into position now.'

Remus led his men around the cloister. Flames jetted up from below, and here and there grenades clattered as they looped over the parapet. Ultramarines hurled them back, but the Salamanders soon learned to hang on to their explosives before hurling them. Remus kept his head down as a cluster of grenades burst against a wall further along from him. Two of his warriors went down, their armour shrieking as they fell. He felt the enormous pressure wave roll over him, but it wasn't enough to put him out of the fight.

'On!' he cried. 'Up and forward!'

The Ultramarines rose and bolted for the stairs. Remus saw Barkha's men opposite, and rolled around the corner to see the forward elements of his squad pouring fire down the stairwell. Barkha rounded the corner of the opposite cloister at the same time, and both men

took up position at the top of the stairs.

'Resistance?' asked Remus.

'Minimal, easily dealt with,' was the terse reply.

'Assault in, three, two one…'

Almost exactly on cue, a volley of heavy gunfire erupted on the far cloister. The chugging bark of heavy bolters filled the courtyard, followed straight after by the *swooshing* hiss of missiles. The fire up the stairwell slackened almost immediately. Remus spun around the corner and took the stairs down to the courtyard two at a time. A Salamander appeared at the opening below, the archway sparking with coruscating residue of the specially modified missile warheads. He levelled a meltagun at Remus, but a shot from Barkha took him in the head and punched him out of sight. Another Salamander fired his weapon around the archway without exposing himself, but the shots were wild. Remus's armour registered an impact on his right shoulder, but the strike was glancing, and wasn't nearly powerful enough to stop his charge.

Remus burst into the courtyard, firing precise bursts of bolter fire at exposed enemy warriors. Hunched behind their vehicles to shelter from Archo's fire from above, they were dangerously exposed from the rear, and three bursts of fire put down two of his opponents. The third Salamander took the hit, but didn't fall. He raised his weapon, a pitch-blackened multi-melta. Remus pulled the trigger, and the hammer of his bolter fell on an empty chamber.

He cursed his lax fire discipline and ran for the cover of an out-of-action Rhino.

Before the multi-melta could fire, a missile struck the ground beside the gunner and the concussive force of the blast knocked the warrior from his feet. Remus slammed into cover, grateful that at least one of Archo's gunners had thought to keep a shot back for an act of 4th Company recklessness. He grinned. Not even a primarch's tome could completely erase the spirit of the *Troublesome Fourth*.

Remus slotted home another magazine and scanned the killing ground of the courtyard, looking for rank badges or some other form of officer markings. He saw etchings of teeth, dragon amulets and various forge symbols, but nothing that resembled a logical progression of rank. He'd been briefed on the Salamander's system of rank markings, but could see nothing that indicated any high level of commander lay among the dead.

Had their intelligence been flawed?

The thought was discarded immediately. The idea that Roboute Guilliman could be wrong about anything was beyond ridiculous. It was heretical, which, given this current engagement, was a rich irony indeed. He returned his attention to the battlefield, anxious that this mission be successful. So far the 4th Company had the foremost record of all the Legion's battle companies, and he wasn't about to blot their copybook with failure now.

The two Salamanders Rhinos were registering as out of action, their command and control facilities destroyed beyond repair, yet the mighty, cliff-sided Land Raider was merely crippled. Its weapons were disabled, and one of its track units had suffered a debilitating impact. It wasn't going anywhere in a hurry, but whoever was inside it was likely still alive.

As if to confirm that fact, the Land Raider spun on its axis, its one functioning track grinding the flagstones to powder beneath the vehicle's monstrous weight. The frontal assault ramp dropped and three figures emerged, titans amongst mortals, giants to their mere men.

Terminators.

Remus had seen Terminator armour during the battle for Calth, mighty suits of armour so colossal it seemed impossible that men could wear them. Such was the newness and complexity of the suits that only a handful of the Ultramarines 1st Company had been trained in their use. Nor were there nearly enough to outfit more than a few hundred of the 1st, for the initial Mechanicum mass conveyers had only just arrived at Macragge when news of the massacre at Isstvan V had arrived.

Hulking, armour-plated behemoths, each Terminator was a full head and shoulders taller than the Ultramarines, the thick plates of their armour shrugging off bolter fire like light rain. Remus had seen the effect these warriors had had on the Word Bearers, but to face one was a new experience, and not one he was keen to repeat.

One warrior bore a cloak of olive green mail over his left pauldron, and the vast skull of some unknown beast with elongated frontal fangs was affixed to his helmet, giving him the hideous appearance of some strange xenos barbarian warrior. In one hand, this warrior carried an enormous, oversized hammer wreathed with crackling energies, in the other a shield worked in the form of the honour badge that granted him the right to wear such terrifyingly powerful armour.

Two others warriors accompanied this brutish war leader – surely the commander of this force of Salamanders – each a humanoid fighting tank armed with a monstrously oversized fist and a bulky weapon resembling two bolters welded together.

Their bolters opened up with a ripping storm of fire, raking the courtyard from left to right in controlled bursts. Three Ultramarines went down, bracketed and gunned down by the commander's two praetorians in concert. This was no random spray of fire, but a methodical slaughter. Shots flashed past Remus, but he ducked back into the cover of the Rhino as the streaking fire turned in his direction.

The enemy commander didn't come at them, instead turning his vast hammer on the walls of the courtyard in the lee of the Land Raider. One swing of the hammer put a man-sized hole in the wall. Masonry and steel reinforcement bars were smashed aside by the lethal weapon. Two more blows at most would see the enemy commander break free of their surprise assault. It would be next to impossible to mount an effective pursuit through the streets of Idrisia. Remus's armour was already registering the flurry of vox traffic coming from the enemy commander as he summoned reinforcements. Within moments, the target would be lost.

'All forces, converge and close the net,' he ordered. 'Command target is on the move.'

Ultramarines warriors broke cover, moving in stepped overwatch patterns, but where any normal enemy would be forced to keep their heads down under such a fusillade, the Terminators walked tall through enough firepower to reduce entire squads to shredded meat.

Remus saw Barkha hit, his armour struck by multiple impacts from the oversized bolters. Barkha cursed and loosed a string of Talassarian vulgarities before dropping to the ground and lying still. Pinned down and with a rapidly diminishing roster of warriors, Remus knew he had only one chance to win this fight. The tactical situation had only one option left, and he opened a channel to Sergeant Archo.

'Archo, suppressive fire on the courtyard. Now!'

'Captain, that places you in the kill zone.'

'I know, just do it! Fill this place with fire!'

The order didn't need to be repeated. Archo knew his place in the chain of command. As did Remus. The mission was paramount. The primarch's writings made it clear that the lives of friendly combatants were of paramount importance, especially Legiones Astartes lives, for they were sure to be in short supply in the coming years of war.

But just as clearly, the primarch knew that wars were won by the blood of the soldiers fighting them. Sometimes the only way to win was to sacrifice everything for the victory.

'Hurry, Archo!' he shouted as the enemy commander finally tore down the wall between him and escape.

The courtyard erupted in fire and flame as missile after missile tore down into the courtyard. Heavy bolters raked back and forth, their fire brutally effective and lethally indiscriminate. A missile took the Salamander captain on the shoulder and the impact spun him around as another struck him full in the plastron. The force of the warheads drove him to his knees. Another missile streaked downwards, but the Salamander warrior brought his shield up to block it. The deflected missile corkscrewed into the courtyard, where it exploded in the midst of a knot of Ultramarines hunkering down behind what little cover remained.

An unending storm of gunfire filled the courtyard, and Remus lost track of everything as the deafening cacophony of sound rolled through him. He'd lost control of this battle, but he could regain it if he could only see what had become of the Salamander war leader.

He belly-crawled around the Rhino, his bolter crossed on his forearms as he skidded through the debris of battle. Shell casings, crushed masonry and bodies. The vox crackled and barked in his ear: nearby squads requesting updates, intercepted chatter from enemy units en route to the building, Thunderhawk pilots yelling warnings at one another. Remus blotted it all out, concentrating on moving at speed to fulfil his objective.

Remus reached the end of the Rhino and scrambled to his knees. He had no chance to weigh his options or consult his primarch's words, and simply swung around the corner of the vehicle's track units. The Salamander Terminator had found his feet, though Remus's visor displayed numerous weakened points on his armour.

The Salamander war leader, perhaps sensing his presence, turned to face him. Remus met his gaze, eye lens to eye lens. Remus sighted along the length of his bolter, and though he couldn't see beyond the snarling ceramite war mask, he felt he could see the warrior's coal dark skin and infernal red eyes. Of course that was ridiculous, but there was a weak spot on the warrior's faceplate, one that a skilled marksman could exploit…

Remus squeezed the trigger and the bolter spat a single shot. Though the weapon fired at supersonic speed, Remus felt he could trace its passage through the air. Even as fired, he knew the shot was true. It struck the Salamander square in the face and Remus watched as his visor registered the kill. The Terminator didn't fall; the armour was too massive to let the wearer collapse, even in death.

Remus let out a breath, rolling onto his back and letting the exertions of this latest engagement drain from him. Though it had been among the shortest, it had been one of the most demanding.

High above the building, roaring Thunderhawks descended like carrion birds circling in anticipation of a feast.

Engagement 314

A cold wind blew down the basalt canyon, carrying dust from the high peaks of Macragge. Remus smelled the pinesap of highland evergreens and the crystalline sharpness of mountaintop tarns on the breeze. He crouched low behind a marker cairn, a three-metre cone of stacked volcanic rock with ancient markings that directed travellers to safe paths through the mountains, locations of water and shelter. Cut in the ancient cuneiform of Macragge, these markings would be unreadable to anyone not native to this world, meaningless even to another citizen of Ultramar.

It had been many years since Remus had run through these mountains as a boy, staggering in an exhausted, near-death state from one cairn to another as he fought for his place in the Ultramarines. Of all the boys that had set off on that last run, he alone had survived; the others dying one by one of heat exhaustion, dehydration, or falls from high cliffs, or being picked off by the vicious, cave-dwelling mountain cats that stalked the high peaks.

Tumbling through the bronze gates of the Fortress of Hera, Remus had been met by Captain Pendarron, the heroic warrior who had fought alongside Roboute Guilliman in the untamed lands of Illyrium before Gallan's betrayal of the Battle King Konor. The captain had picked him up, dusted him down, and sent him to the apothecarion with a curt nod of approbation.

Thinking back to that time brought a welcome flush of endorphins, but it was a short-lived pleasure. That was another life ago, and nearly two centuries of war separated that young boy from the Legiones Astartes Remus had become. Decades of training still awaited

that young boy, but they had been years of intense pressure, tribulation and, yes, joy. Proving himself worthy of a place within the ranks of the Ultramarines had been his greatest honour, and he still recalled his mother's pride at seeing him march through the streets of Macragge clad in brilliant blue battle-plate.

He had never seen his mother again, yet the loss did not touch him as deeply as he felt it should. His mind had been reshaped in myriad ways, and though the capacity for sadness and emotion had not been removed, it took extreme stimuli to trigger emotions connected with his previous life as a mortal.

A crackle on the vox-network brought Remus out of his reverie, and he shook off thoughts of golden days and concentrated on the present dark ones. This campaign had been the toughest of all, for the Sons of Horus had consistently outfought and outmanoeuvred them at every turn. In space, the Warmaster's fleets had battered through their picket lines, and flanking forces of stealthy ambush vessels had appeared from nowhere to wreak havoc within the Ultramarines precise battle lines.

World after world had fallen. Tarentus, Masali and Quintarn were gone, the loss of the latter planet bringing a lump of bile to Remus's throat after all the 4th Company had gone through in their struggle against the Salamanders. Prandium was now lost, the devastation begun by the World Eaters now concluded by a viral bombardment that stripped the ruined planet of all living matter in a viral hellstorm. All that was left of Prandium was a barren rock.

Iax had been firebombed until the Garden of Ultramar was an ashen wasteland. No two campaigns the Warmaster waged were fought the same way, and Remus had heard whispers in the higher echelons of command that the planners in the grand strategium were running out of ideas to fight him. Remus knew that could not be true. The primarch's writings would have a solution to this assault on Ultramar, it was just too complex and overarching a plan to be comprehended by mortals, even ones as cognitively enhanced as the Legiones Astartes.

Roboute Guilliman had never yet lost a war, and he certainly wouldn't lose this one.

Macragge could not fall.

It just couldn't.

Remus didn't know whether to think of that as fact or wishful thinking.

Barkha scrambled over the rocky ground towards him, keeping low behind the fangs of rock that sheltered this element of the 4th Company. Thirty metres below, the floor of the canyon twisted a serpentine path through the mountains, the ground flat and hard-packed. Well away from the battles being fought in the lowland approaches to the Fortress of Hera, it had been decided that it was certain the Warmaster would move flanking forces through these canyons to open a second front against the Ultramarines last bastion.

The 4th Company guarded the passes to ensure no second front was opened.

'They're coming,' said Barkha. 'Sons of Horus armour units, with speeders and bikes in the vanguard. It's a pretty small force, but there's bound to be others threading their way over the mountains.'

That was true enough, but numerous elements of the 4th Company were watching the secret paths through the mountains.

'What's their separation like?'

'Sloppy,' said Barkha. 'They're in a hurry. The tanks are labouring, and the bikes are slowing down to keep close.'

Remus looked down into the canyon, hearing the distant rumbling of the enemy vehicles as they approached the killing box. The mountains of Macragge were a different order of inimical environment to any the Sons of Horus would have encountered before. Time and time again, the enemies of Macragge had been undone by its hostile geography. The Sons of Horus would be no different.

'Pass the word. Fire on my signal. Target the lead tank and the rear tank. Trap them in the box and then work your way to the centre.'

'Understood,' said Barkha, and Remus heard the note of exasperation in the sergeant's voice. The 4th Company had practised drills like these countless times, and didn't need him to tell them how to run an ambush. Remus checked his bolter one last time and propped himself against a rock with a view through a knife-cut in the rocks before him. He could see down into the canyon, but the shadows and dark hue of the rock concealed him from view.

He overlaid a tactical schematic over the view of the canyon, seeing his warriors picked out in pale blue throughout the overlooking crags and gullies. There wasn't an angle left uncovered, an escape route that wasn't a death trap or a square centimetre of ground that couldn't be reached by Ultramarines gunfire.

'Easy meat,' whispered Remus.

The noise of engines grew louder, echoing from the canyon walls. Remus heard the chugging breath of Rhinos, the deeper, throaty rumble of Predators and the roaring thunder of at least one Land Raider. The high-pitched bleat of bikes carried over the noise, and Remus kept his head down as a pair of speeders zipped into view.

Both were painted in the sea green of the Sons of Horus, their frontal glacis emblazoned with a flame-coloured eye. The speeders paused, like sniffer dogs hunting a scent, but Remus knew these mountains well and had placed his kill teams with perfect cover. No matter how sophisticated the speeders' surveyor packages were, they wouldn't find his warriors.

The speeders carefully eased their way into the canyon, swiftly followed by a five-strong squad of bikes, each one heavily armoured and fitted with forward-firing bolters. A black banner decorated with yet another eye symbol flapped behind the lead bike, and Remus fought the urge to open fire on these invaders.

Then the tanks came, a pair of Rhinos, swiftly followed by three Predators and the grumbling monster of a Land Raider. Another three Rhinos followed it, and yet another pair of Predators formed a rearguard. Barkha had called this a small force, and measured against the scale of warfare a Legion could put in the field it was, but this was still a formidable display of firepower.

The bikes and speeders moved off, and Remus knew they were never going to get a better chance than this. He pushed onto his knees and sighted down his bolter at the pilot of the nearest speeder. He squeezed off a round, and was rewarded by a kill signal in his helmet. The vehicle slewed away as the pilot slumped over his controls. Remus's shot was the signal to his ambush force, but before a single shot could be fired, a booming volley of gunfire sounded from higher in the mountains.

Remus saw his men die in droves from the deadly accurate fire, and spun to see dozens of muzzle flashes from the rocks higher in the mountains. Ultramarines icons were winking out on his visor, and his moment of paralysed shock almost cost him his life. His armour registered two impacts, both glancing and not serious enough to hamper him, but he dived into the cover of the stacked cairn.

'Barkha!' he yelled, returning fire uphill. 'Do you have a visual?'

'Affirmative,' came the sergeant's harried voice over the vox. 'Sons of Horus infiltrators. Squad markings match those on the vehicles below.'

Remus was stunned at this turn of events. How could the Sons of Horus have gotten behind them? How had they known the Ultramarines were lying in wait for them?

Furious exchanges of gunfire flickered back and forth between the two forces, and Remus knew the vehicles below would soon be adding their own weight of fire to the fight. The ambushers had been ambushed, and there was no sense in continuing an engagement that was already lost. The primarch's words on the subject were abundantly clear.

When they have the drop on you, don't draw.

'All units,' ordered Remus. 'Withdraw and regroup. Rally point Ultima Sextus. Go!'

Remus bounded from cover to cover, firing as he went. He had no time to aim, and just had to hope that his wild shots hit one of these Sons of Horus bastards. He heard the bark of gunfire all around him, punctuated by the roar of vehicle engines and the crash of artillery pieces launching arcing volleys of shells. A ragged group of Ultramarines ran with him, an amalgamation of three squads he'd gathered after the rout from Konor's Gate further down the mountains.

Every move they'd made, the Sons of Horus had countered or circumvented. It had been humiliating to find that every recourse to his primarch's words had resulted in dismal failure. Remus despaired of winning this fight, but had to keep faith that some grander stratagem was yet to reveal itself.

Bolts of light streaked overhead, withering storms of las-fire as helots traded fire with forward units of the Warmaster's army. Remus had no tactical view; a shot from a Sons of Horus sniper had damaged his helmet beyond repair and so he had discarded it three kilometres back. To fight with his head unprotected was an alien sensation to Remus, denying him access to all manner of battlefield information, but the connection to the visceral nature of the fighting couldn't be denied. To smell the acrid reek of propellant fuel, the backwash of shellfire and the burnt air taste of las-fire was a powerful kick in the guts to keep your head down.

Sweat streaked his face and black dust covered his scalp. Above him, the sky was a swirl of colourful streaks of gunfire and arcing explosions. The noise was unlike anything he had experienced before, a mix of snapping small-arms fire, mixed with the deeper bangs of close-firing heavy guns.

Sergeant Archo crouched in a makeshift trench; his warriors taking cover beneath its firing step as the Sons of Horus advanced behind a creeping barrage of artillery. Just like in the canyons to the south, the Warmaster's forces had consistently blindsided the Ultramarines, which seemed so absurdly improbable, that Remus wondered if this was not some hideous nightmare from which he could not awaken.

He risked a glance over the rocks, seeing a grimly advancing wave of warriors armoured in the colours of the Sons of Horus. Each bore the eye of Horus device upon their chest, and that same symbol was repeated on the banners flapping from the aerials of the hundreds of armoured vehicles pouring fire uphill.

'Not so fancy now, are they?' said Barkha, dropping in beside Remus. Like the captain of the 4th Company, Barkha had removed his helmet, his leathery skin tanned almost black and his hair bound in tight cornrows to a short ponytail at the nape of his neck.

'They don't need to be,' replied Remus.

'What do you mean?'

'Exactly what I said. We're all out of options. The Warmaster has a knife to our throat, and he has no more need for subtlety. This is the death blow.'

'Truly?' said Barkha, and Remus saw the fear of that fact written all across his face. 'We must have some plan to meet this attack?'

'Then tell me what else we can do? Every stratagem has been met and countered. Every subterfuge of war has been anticipated and defeated. All we can do now is fight like true warrior kings of Ultramar and take as many of the bastards with us as we can.'

'But the primarch must have considered this situation,' pressed Barkha. 'You must have misread his words or issued a wrong order. That's the only way we could have been brought to this.'

Remus shook his head. 'You think I haven't thought that since this engagement began? I've been over it all a hundred times, and I forgot nothing, misread nothing. We did everything that could have been done.'

'Then how has it come to this?'

'Because there are some things that can't be met with plans and preparation,' said Remus. 'Some warriors are clever enough to ram a speartip through the spokes of any plan, no matter how brilliantly conceived. The Warmaster is such a warrior.'

'But Primarch Guilliman…'

‘Does not fight with us,’ snapped Remus. ‘Now stop talking and start killing!’

Step by brutal step, the Ultramarines were pushed back up the mountains, leaving thousands of fallen warriors in their wake. Every metre gained by the Sons of Horus was paid for in lives, but Remus had been right; this *was* the death blow.

With the Fortress of Hera at their backs, the defenders of Macragge prepared for their last battle. To yield the land of their forefathers without a fight was not the Ultramarines way, but the time was almost at hand where they would need to face the Warmaster from behind marble parapets and towers of gold and silver. If this was the end then it would be the most glorious end imaginable.

Remus had volunteered the 4th Company to act as the Ultramarines rearguard, and they took position on the Via Fortissimus, the great road that led from the plains below to the mighty bronze gate of their Legion fortress. Behind them, the depleted ranks of the Ultramarines battle companies that still survived all but fled to the transient safety of the Fortress of Hera.

If the Warmaster’s armies had made one thing clear, it was that *nowhere* was truly safe.

On Macragge or anywhere in the galaxy.

As the Sons of Horus prepared for their final push towards the gates, Remus saw a colossal Land Raider rumble through the ranks of the enemy. Though no larger than any other such armoured vehicle, a trick of the moment seemed to render it mightier than any vehicle had a right to be. Bellicose cheers greeted this tank, and as its assault ramp lowered to the volcanic rock of the mountains, Remus saw why its arrival warranted such an outpouring of devotion.

The warrior who stepped from its red-lit interior was of such magnitude that it seemed he dwarfed all those around him. His armour was of deepest black, gleaming and pristine with gold chains and a fur-lined cape of foxbat hide. A helmet of such perfect symmetry that it made Remus want to weep concealed the warrior’s face, and though he knew whose face lay behind the visor, he dreaded seeing it lifted.

Remus felt the breath catch in his throat.

The Warmaster. Horus Lupercal…

The Emperor’s brightest, bastard son had come to witness the final humiliation of the Ultramarines.

The Sons of Horus cheered, the sound echoing from the mountains like the battle cry of some ancient, heathen tribe. Their war shouts were imprecations to forgotten, bloody gods, and every man of the 4th Company felt a tremor of fear worm its way into his heart at the sight of this avatar of blood and death.

What could stand against such a foe and live?

What army could withstand the genius of this warrior’s intellect?

We may not defeat him, but that we stand against him will be remembered, thought Remus. *Perhaps that is enough…*

‘Warriors of Ultramar!’ bellowed Remus. ‘Remember where you are and in whose name you fight. Each and every one of you is a hero of the Ultramarines, a warrior without compare, and a killer whose heart is unbroken!’

Remus felt his conviction and choler grow with every word, his voice carrying easily over the mountains to the Ultramarines warriors withdrawing to the fortress and the assembling Sons of Horus. ‘Only in death does our duty to the Emperor’s dream end, and only with our death will it die. I will not let that dream die, will you?’

As one, the 4th company answered with a resounding, ‘No!’ and their denial echoed strangely from the mountainsides such that it sounded as though some among the Sons of Horus joined in.

The mighty warrior in the centre of the enemy ranks raised his fist. Sunlight caught the gold edging of his gauntlet as four gleaming blades slid from its upper faces. The gauntlet swept down and the Sons of Horus charged.

The battle was without finesse, without glory and without hope of success for the XIII Legion. Though Remus had followed every tenet contained within the primarch’s writings, everything came down to this last desperate fight. It was an artillery bombardment, a long range duel, a short range firefight and, at the last, a close-up storm of blades and fists.

Remus had long since expended his cache of ammo, and switched to his blade. His every blow was struck with desperate fervour, his every parry made with a frantic desire to stay alive and to kill as many of these invaders as possible. Any semblance of shape to the battle had been lost the instant the two forces collided.

Warriors in brilliant blue swirled in an ever-shifting mêlée of hacking blades with traitors in the green of a distant ocean. Even as he fought, Remus wondered how history would remember this war. Who would be recalled as the traitors? Future history was the provision of the victors, so who could say in what role the Ultramarines would be cast? Would-be saviours of a glorious ideal that died in the mountains of Macragge, or base traitors whose arrogance was matched only by the scale of their failure?

They fought in an ever-decreasing circle of warriors, Ultramarines falling with every passing moment as the enemy overwhelmed them. Like a noose tightening on the throat of a condemned man, the life was choked from the 4th Company’s defiance until only Remus remained.

He had given his all, but it had not been enough. The strength that had fuelled him during these engagements fled his body. He had been struck so many times that it was a wonder he was still standing. Remus slumped to his knees, broken by disappointment and robbed of his certainty by this defeat. His head bowed as he imagined the scale of his failure.

Remus looked up as an enormous shadow enveloped him.

The Warmaster towered over Remus, his vast gauntlet raised high like the talons of some lethal predator. Remus awaited the blow

that would end this farce, but instead of death, the Warmaster's claws retracted into the gauntlet. Horus Lupercal raised his hands to his helmet, unsnapping the gorget seals that secured it in place.

Remus couldn't bear to look at him.

'Look at me,' said a voice golden with perfection.

'I can't,' said Remus. 'I failed.'

'No, Remus Ventanus,' said Roboute Guilliman. 'You didn't. The failure was mine.'

Remus sat alone on the spur of a rocky cliff overlooking the Fortress of Hera. It seemed absurd for it to look so quiet, when only hours before it had been the scene of so terrible a conflict. Helots and Legion serfs scoured the mountainside of debris, shell-casings and dented pieces of armour torn from the combatants.

The Legion armourers were already repainting the suits of battle-plate and vehicles that had masqueraded upon the field of battle in the Sons of Horus livery. The halls of the Legion stank of thinner and paint as 'enemy' colours and markings were once again removed from armoured plates and weaponry.

Remus had deposited his battle-plate in his arming chamber and instructed his new equerry to have it cleaned and serviced, a task he would normally attend to himself, but which felt somehow wrong today. He had torn the laser designator from the barrel of his weapon and hurled it from the cliffs, despising what it represented and hating that such a device had even been necessary.

Dressed in tan fatigues and a simple chiton of pale blue, Remus let the sun warm his face and awaited the reprimands that would undoubtedly follow his and the Legion's failure to resist the attack of the Sons of Horus.

Was there anything he could have done?

Could any warrior have bested the Sons of Horus?

A sudden smile crept across his face as Remus realised there *was* one warrior who might have turned the tide of battle…

'There was nothing you could have done,' said a voice behind him, and Remus turned to see Roboute Guilliman. He rose to his feet, bowing his head in contrition to his gene-sire. One could not look too long at the sun without being blinded by its radiance, and the same was true of Roboute Guilliman. Sculpted to perfection, his classical features were tanned and smooth, gracefully formed and handsomely arranged like the statues lining the Via Triumphal that led to the Sanctuary of Correction at the heart of the Fortress of Hera.

Guilliman walked to the edge of the cliff, staring out over his domain, and Remus took his position at the primarch's shoulder, though the top of his head reached only to the middle of his liege-lord's bicep. Like Remus, Guilliman was stripped out of his armour and wore light training robes, though Remus could not shake the image of the primarch clad in the midnight-black plate of the Warmaster. Though patches of its cerulean brilliance had shone through like sunlight on a cloudy day, the image of so fine a figure as the Ultramarines primarch clad as a traitor would never leave him.

'I must have done something wrong,' said Remus. 'It is the only explanation.'

Guilliman shook his head and smiled grimly. 'You credit me with too much, Remus. I am not infallible. This last engagement should have shown you that.'

'I can't accept that,' said Remus.

'What is so hard to accept?' said Guilliman. 'You followed my teachings, and they led you to defeat. If this and Calth have taught us anything it is that we must always be adaptable and never too hidebound in our thinking.'

'But your teachings…'

'Are yet flawed,' said Guilliman. 'No one, not even one such as I, can anticipate every possible outcome of battle. My words are not some holy writ that *must* be obeyed. There must always be room for personal initiative on the battlefield. You and I both know how one spark of heroism can turn the tide of battle. That knowledge and personal experience can only be earned in blood, and the leader in the field must always be the ultimate arbiter of what course of action should be followed.'

'I'll remind you of that when the *Troublesome Fourth* are next in the field.'

Guilliman chuckled. 'Be sure that you do, Remus. I am aware that some think me emotionless, the Talos of ancient days come to life, and desiring only to suffocate free thinking with my prescriptive ways. But such times are upon us that brook no deviation from our course.'

'So was there a way to win that last fight?'

'Perhaps, but I will let you find that answer.'

'And what will you do?'

'I will continue to pen the *Codex Astartes*,' said Guilliman.

'*Codex Astartes*?' said Remus. 'Is that what you are calling it?'

Guilliman smiled and nodded. 'Yes, I think it has an appropriately *weighty* feel to it, don't you? In war and in peace it will provide an invaluable repository of knowledge, but I do not wish it to be regarded as a substitute for reason and initiative. Do you understand?'

'I think so,' said Remus, as Guilliman beckoned him over to the edge of the cliff.

'These are the darkest days the Imperium has known,' said Guilliman. 'And I fear for what the future will bring. Calth is lost to us, and Isstvan. Who knows how many other worlds my brother will burn in his madness?'

'But you have a plan to fight him?' pleaded Remus.

Guilliman did not answer, as though afraid of what Remus might make of his answer.

At last he said, ‘I have a plan, yes, and it is a dangerous one, too dangerous to divulge for the moment. But when the time comes to put it into action, I must ask you all to trust me as never before. When that time comes, you will be called traitors, cowards and faithless weaklings, but nothing could be further from the truth. I can see no hope in the times ahead for the Imperium as we know it, and that is why I had you fight these mock engagements. However this war plays out, it is inevitable that you will need to fight warriors you count as brothers. Perhaps even those who currently stand in opposition to the Warmaster.’

‘I won’t pretend to understand what that means, but you can count on us to do everything you ask of us,’ promised Remus.

‘I know I can,’ said Guilliman.

‘We beat every army you sent at us, but I have had time to think why we lost against the Sons of Horus.’

‘That was quick.’

‘I’m a fast learner.’

‘True. So what is your conclusion?’ asked Guilliman.

‘It wasn’t a fair contest of arms.’

‘How so?’

‘You didn’t fight alongside us,’ said Remus.

‘And you believe that would have made a difference?’

‘I *know* it would have made a difference,’ said Remus, looking up at Guilliman’s perfect features. ‘And you know it too.’

Guilliman shrugged modestly, but Remus could see that the primarch agreed with him.

Roboute Guilliman looked up into the heavens, as though trying to perceive some far distant truth or faraway battle yet to come. At last Guilliman turned to Remus, and the captain of the 4th Company saw a haunted look in his eyes, like a desire clung to in the face of hopelessness.

‘Then let us hope that when the Warmaster is to be put down, I am the man facing him.’

Liar's Due

James Swallow

+++Broadcast Minus Zero Zero [Solar]+++

The voice from the speaker horn above the square was metered and automatic, and it did not differ from the everyday tonality it gave to matters of the most mundane news. The flat, near-emotionless words rang out over the streets of Town Forty-Four, across the mainway and the alleys, over the rooftops of the general store and the rover stables. The people under the shadow of the Skyhook stood rooted to the spot in shocked silence, or else they wandered in circles, fear and confusion robbing them of reason.

The recording reached its conclusion and began again.

'*The Imperium speaks,*' said the humming, clicking voice, a chime of orchestral tones jangling beneath the opening phrase. '*On this day, news from the core reaches the agricultural colony of Virger-Mos II.*' That part of the statement was always the same, promising the people of Forty-Four and the other settlements across this backwater world a measure of understanding about the galaxy at large around them.

Today, the prologue rang an ominous note, the familiar turning sinister. The main body of the message began; somewhere far over their heads, at the summit of the Skyhook, was the planet's lone astropath. The psyker's sole duty was to parse news into palatable forms and send it down the telegraph. '*This is Terra calling, and with grave import. Make all citizens aware and know this grim certainty. The battle has broken the Eternity Gate. The Imperial Palace falls as Terra burns around it. It is our great sorrow to announce that the Emperor of Mankind lies dead at the hand of Horus Lupercal, Warmaster.*'

Some of the townsfolk began to weep, others cradled their heads and tried to deny the voice's words. One man laughed, a humourless bark of utter disbelief. And then there were others, who looked on and said nothing, only nodding as if they had known all along that this day would come.

Beneath the speaker horn, the marquetry boards ticked and clicked, the carved wooden slates turning about to form the shapes of the words. '*The Emperor joins the roll of honour alongside his sons: Sanguinius, Dorn, Russ and the Khan. The remnants of his forces now sue for peace. Surrender is at hand here. The inter-Legionary conflict is no more. The battle for independence is concluded, and Horus has his victory. Even now, ships are being dispatched to all points of the etheric compass to cement his new rule as Imperator Rex.*' There was a moment of silence, as if the machine-speaker could not fully grasp the words it projected. '*Know this. The war is over. Horus has the throne.*'

The speakers fell silent and the panic began to bed in.

In the cool of the icehouse's porch, Leon Kyyter's gaze dropped to the upturned palms of his hands and he saw the line of little white crescents where he had dug his fingernails into his own flesh. He felt dizzy and sick inside. The youth was afraid to stand up for fear he might stumble and collapse upon the cracked blacktop of the mainway. It was a nightmare; it felt like a dream, there was no other explanation. Nothing else made any kind of sense.

The Emperor, dead? It was impossible, unbelievable. The birds in the sky would speak High Gothic and the seasons would rewrite themselves before such a thing could happen! Leon refused to accept it. He would not!

'Horus has the throne…' He heard the words repeated by one of the grainwives from the Forroth farmstead. She was trying the phrase out, speaking it aloud to be sure it wasn't just a string of nonsense words.

'Will he come here?' asked someone else, and the question was like a spark to kindling. Suddenly everyone in the town square was talking at once, voices rising in angry confusion. Leon was buffeted by fragments of conversation coming from all around.

'...how long would that take?'

'...already on their way...'

'...but there is nothing for them here!'

'...could he be killed?'

'...this world will fall under the Warmaster's shadow...'

The youth scowled and pulled himself to his feet, pushing away quickly, almost as if he could outrun the dark thoughts swirling in his mind's eye. *Terra on fire. The palace collapsing. A sky black with starships. A battle zone choked with silenced guns.*

He forced his way through the mass of people; there had to be hundreds of them, almost the entire populace of Town Forty-Four crowding into the open space to hear the voice of the weekly broadcast. Was the same scene being played out in every other township down the wires, from the capital, Oh-One, to the icewheat farms up in Eighty-Seven?

Leon looked up and traced the lines of the telegraph cables with his gaze, the web of black threads dangling from the slender impact-

plastic poles. The line of the weathered, bone-coloured masts led away out of the town and vanished across the endless landscape of barley fields. Beyond the limits of the settlement, the land was flat and featureless from horizon to horizon, broken only by the occasional steel finger of a silo or the lines of a railhead. It was a static, unchanging landscape, symbolic of the planet itself.

Virger-Mos II was an agri-world, a breadbasket colony so far off the axis of the core Imperial worlds that it was almost invisible; still, it was one of hundreds of similar planets that fed a hungry empire, and in that manner, perhaps it might be thought, to have some minor strategic value. But it was an isolated place in the Dominion of Storms, ranged in the deeps of the Ultima Segmentum. A remote, unimportant world that turned unnoticed by the rest of the galaxy. There were less than a million people living on the second planet's wind-burned surface, all of them working in service to farms in one way or another.

And none of them could forget their place, especially those who lived in Forty-Four. Turning to face the other way, Leon's view was immediately dominated by a tower of black shadow that rose from behind the service complex beyond the square, vanishing into the sky. Tipping his head back, the space elevator seemed to thin away to a thread's diameter as it went towards orbit. Inside, automated systems that few human beings had ever seen worked without pause, gathering the cargo pods full of grain that arrived via the railheads on drone-trains, and carrying them up into space. The Skyhook was Town Forty-Four's sole reason to exist; while there were farmers who nominally called it home, they kept mostly to their ranches. The settlement was for those whose lives revolved around the elevator and its operation; but in truth, their function was almost cosmetic.

Leon recalled one night, when his father, Ames, had come home from the tavern in his cups and offered the boy a gloomy lesson; he told him that the town had no reason to exist. Every system inside the Skyhook, from the cargo handlers to the complex mesh of diamond ropes that hoisted the pods towards space, was run by automata. Every soul in Forty-Four could die in their beds at once and the elevator would run on, taking the grain and raising it high to where cargo lighters could meet it in orbit. The lesson, Ames Kyyter had said, was that even when people deluded themselves into thinking they were important, the reverse was usually the truth.

The young man didn't see it that way, though. He didn't think of the shadow of the Skyhook as something to be detested, like his father did. The old man cast the tower like a monster, and he glared up at it each day, as if he was daring the orbital tether to snap and come down upon him. No, Leon saw it as a bridge to something greater, a monument to human endeavour. In the shadow he felt protected, as if somehow the aegis of the Emperor was captured in its shade.

He had felt that way until today.

Thoughts of his father drew Leon back down the shallow rise towards the dormitory house that had been owned by his family for seven generations. He was so intent on it that he wandered straight into a knot of people gripped in tense, emotive conversation.

'It doesn't matter what you think!' Dallon Prael worked as a senior solarman out in the vane orchard, where the light from Virger-Mos's bright yellow sun was captured and turned into power for the township. He was a large man, but his size was all illusion; Prael was flabby and lacked any muscle or stamina, as Leon had observed over spirited games of pushpull at the tavern. His chubby hands wove in the air. 'We all heard the telegraph!'

Among the group, a handful of the assembled townsfolk gave Prael's words nods of approval. But the man he was addressing grew a grimace across his face.

'So what do you propose, Dallon?' Silas Cincade put the question with force. 'We stand around and fret?' In contrast to the solarman, Cincade was tall and wiry, but his real strength was underneath his aspect. Silas's elderly father owned the rover stables and his son worked maintenance on the vehicles there. Leon couldn't recall a time when the man didn't have grease-smeared hands or the scent of battery fluid about him.

Prael and Cincade were tavern-mates, but here and now that seemed irrelevant. This wasn't an argument over politics at the bar-step, but something else, propelled by fear. The tension in the air was strong, like the crackle of pre-storm static. Leon began to wonder if the two men might come to blows; not a week's end had passed in the last two years that someone had not caused an argument on the matter of the civil war, and this pair were often at the heart of it.

'You would rather we stumble blindly?' Prael was demanding. 'I spoke to Yacio. He's telling me that every other telegraph channel has gone black. No connections coming in, nothing but silence.' He folded his arms. 'What do you make of that, eh? That's military doctrine, isn't it? Cut the lines of communication.'

'What do you know about soldiering?' Cincade snapped back. 'The only Imperial Army garrison is in Oh-One and you've never left this quad!'

'I trained!' Prael retorted hotly. 'When the Imperial Army came here and showed us how to drill, I trained for the town watch!'

Cincade opened his hands. 'That would be the watch we don't have and never needed?'

'Maybe we need it now!' said one of the others, a ginger-haired man from the medicae's office.

Prael nodded. 'Aye! If I wasn't here talking, I'd be dusting off my rifle!'

The mechanic rolled his eyes and caught sight of Leon, looking to him for support. The youth could only manage a tense shrug. 'Look,' said Cincade, trying to inject a note of calm into his voice. 'You know how the air goes. Lines drop out all the time.'

In that, he was correct. Some peculiarity of the mineral-laced soil of the colony played havoc with vox-transmitters, meaning that communications were solely sent and received by telegraphic cables strung across the landscape, and here, up the side of the Skyhook. Without a wire, the towns on Virger-Mos II were reduced to using message riders or heliographs. The rich soil made it a wonder for growing crops, but the abrasion of it scoured the rockcrete walls of every building and made blackcough the colony's worst killer. Sometimes the windborne powder was enough to chew through the shielded lines stretching across the countryside.

'If the capital has gone quiet, there's a rational explanation for it,' Cincade went on.

A woman, red-faced with near hysteria, glared at him. ‘You can’t know that!’

‘We need to protect ourselves,’ said Prael. ‘That’s what we should be thinking about!’

Cincade grimaced. ‘All right, all right! How about this, then? I’ve got my trike in the stables. How about I drive out to Oh-One and find out what’s going on? I could be there and back before nightfall.’

‘It’s not safe.’ Leon said the words without thinking.

The mechanic shot him a look. ‘How do you know?’

‘The boy is right!’ Prael went on. ‘Throne and Blood, did you not hear the broadcast, Silas? The war–’

‘Is not our concern!’ Cincade replied. ‘We’re in the arse-end of the Imperium, where neither man nor primarch would bother to turn his gaze! So this sort of sorry panic is pointless. Better we find out what is happening from the colonial governor himself, yes?’ The man turned to Leon and gave him a light shove in the back. ‘Go on, son, get home. Look to your Da.’ He glanced up as he walked away. ‘And the same to the rest of you, too!’

Prael muttered something under his breath as the red-faced woman glared after the mechanic. ‘He’s always swanned around this town like he smells sweet,’ she grated. ‘Now the grease-monkey is giving orders?’

Leon became aware she was looking at him, waiting for the youth to agree with her. He said nothing and went on his way, heading back towards the dormitory.

His father wasn’t there when he arrived. Leon took the stairs to the top floor two at a time, brushing his hand over the forever-closed door to his mother’s room as he passed it, as a matter of ingrained habit. At the landing, he went to the suite – it was a fancy name for the chambers, something that seemed too grand for just a nondescript bedroom-balcony-fresher combination. He rapped on the door with the back of his hand, calling loudly.

‘Esquire!’ Leon kept up the insistent pace of his knocks; there were no other residents at the dormitory house, and there hadn’t been for some time. These were the fallow months when the drivers from the far fields stayed at their ranches rather than venture in under the shadow of the Skyhook. ‘Esquire Mendacs, are you there?’

He heard movement through the door and presently it slid open on oiled runners. ‘Young Leon,’ said the man, absently smoothing down the front of his tunic. ‘Such urgency.’

‘The telegraph–’ Leon spoke so quickly he stumbled over his words and had to gulp in air and begin again. ‘The telegraph says the Emperor is dead and Horus has taken Terra! The war is over!’ He blinked. ‘I don’t think it can be true…’

‘No?’ Mendacs wandered back into the apartment and Leon trailed after him. ‘Or do you mean you *wish* it not to be true?’

The esquire was a slight man, his skin pale in comparison to the tanned natives of the agri-world, and he had long fingers that reminded the youth of a woman’s. Still, he carried himself with a kind of certainty that Leon kept trying to emulate. Mendacs had a quiet confidence that radiated from him; it was peculiar how someone who at first glance could appear unassuming, could also command attention if need be.

He poured a measure of amasec from a flask on the table and glanced at where Leon stood. The young man’s hands kept finding one another of their own accord, knotting and wringing.

Leon repeated the telegraph message as best he could remember it, the words spilling out of him. Emotion coloured every syllable, and he felt his cheeks redden and go warm as he reached the conclusion. Mendacs just listened, and took small, purse-lipped sips from the liquor.

‘Horus’s warships are coming here,’ Leon went on. ‘They may already be close by!’

‘One cannot tell,’ Mendacs offered. ‘The currents of warp space are strange and unpredictable. The passage of time there is somewhat elastic.’

Frustration furrowed Leon’s brow. Of all the reactions he had expected from the esquire, this was not one of them. The man seemed almost… resigned. ‘Are… Are you not troubled by this turn of events? The war comes to us! The Imperium is in tatters! Are you not afraid of what will happen next?’

Mendacs put down the glass of amasec and wandered to the window. His pict-slates and a quiver of stylus-rods lay there in an untidy pile. ‘It’s not that, Leon,’ he said. ‘Any sane man is concerned about the future. But I have learned that you can’t let yourself be ruled by questions of what *may* be about to happen. A life lived in the shadow of unfulfilled possibility is inward-looking and limited.’

The youth didn’t understand the man’s meaning, and told him so.

A moment of dismay crossed Mendacs’s face. ‘The dust storms that come during this season. Are you afraid of them?’

‘Not really... I mean, they can be dangerous, but–‘

‘But you understand them. You know you cannot change them. So you take shelter and let them pass, then pick up your life and progress as if they had never been.’ Mendacs made an inclusive gesture that encompassed them both. ‘We are little people, my friend. And the likes of us cannot change the course of wars that span the galaxy. We can only live our lives, and accept what fate presents to us.’

‘But the Emperor is dead!’ Leon blurted out the words, his voice rising. ‘I can’t accept that!’

Mendacs cocked his head. ‘You can’t change that fact. If it is so, you must accept it. What alternative is there?’

Leon turned away, shaking his head, closing his eyes. ‘No. No…’ He felt dizzy all over again, and stumbled into a drape partitioning off part of the bedroom from the main space of the suite. For a moment, he found himself looking into Mendacs’s sleeping area. He saw

the low, narrow bed, the rail of clothes hangers.

On the bed there was a case – the small valise the esquire had carried on a shoulder strap when he first arrived, Leon remembered – and it lay open. Inside lay not clothes or more pict-slates, but a conformal array of equipment that resembled nothing familiar to the youth. It wasn't metallic and greasy-looking like the innards of a rover engine; it gave the impression of being fragile, like fans of black glassaic and silver filigree.

But then the train of thought forming in Leon's mind was abruptly forestalled by the harsh bark of his father's voice echoing up the stairs. 'Boy! Get yourself out here!' He could hear the *tromp* of boots on the staircase.

'You should go,' Mendacs said, without weight.

Ames Kyyter was at the landing as Leon left the room. He gave the other man a terse nod and then glared at his son. 'I've told you before not to pester the esquire. Come on, down with you.' He gave Leon a cuff around the ear and the youth ducked it, racing back to the lower floor.

His father came at his back. 'Where did you go?' he demanded. 'I told you to stay here, wait for me to come home. Instead I return and you're gone.'

'The telegraph!' Leon piped. 'Did you hear it?'

Ames's face soured and he shook his head. 'That's got you worked up, has it? I should have known.'

Leon could hardly believe his father's cavalier dismissal of the import of the message. *First Mendacs and now him?* 'Of course it has! The war, Da! The war is coming here!'

'Don't raise your voice to me!' Ames snapped back. 'I heard the bloody spool. I know what it said! But I'm not going to wet my britches over it!' He blew out a breath. 'At a time like this, a man needs to be calm. Understand the import of the day, not run around like a damned fool.'

Leon felt a wash of cold roll through him. 'Da. What's going to happen to us?' He hated the way the question made him sound like a frightened little boy.

'Nothing. *Nothing*,' insisted his father. 'You think the Warmaster gives a wet shit about this colony? You think he even knows the name of this star system?' He scowled. 'You think that the Emperor did?'

Despite himself, Leon let his hands contract into fists. It made him angry when the old man spoke about the Emperor in that tone of voice. Dismissive. Disrespectful.

He opened his mouth to answer back, but the thin scream of a woman sounded. Both of them went to the front door, following the cry, and there, out on the street, they found people pointing into the south-western sky, a new shade of fresh fear on their faces. Leon stepped out and turned his head to see.

The low sun was at their backs, and the sky was a shade of deep blue, broken with a few long lines of grey-white clouds. High up, the moons were visible as ghosts, but what caught his eye were the lights.

For a moment, he wasn't sure what he was seeing. They were lines of fire, thread-thin, marching slowly across the heavens towards the far horizon. There were lots of them, a dozen or more at his count. It was hard to be certain. They were reflecting sunlight as they fell.

'Invasion,' said someone, and the word was almost a sob.

'The Warmaster!' Leon turned and saw the red-faced woman again. She was stabbing her finger at the air. 'He's coming down from orbit!'

'They're heading in the direction of the capital,' said another bystander. 'Isn't that how they do things? Droppers or something, they call them. Packed full of soldiers and weapons!'

'Drop-pods,' Leon corrected, half to himself.

'What was that, boy?'

Leon turned to the woman. 'No, I mean, I don't think–'

'You're the expert all of a sudden then, are you?' she retorted, glaring at him.

'I've read books,' he replied weakly, and pushed on before she could speak again. 'I mean, we don't know what that is. The lights in the sky… they c–could be meteorites. I've seen them many–'

The woman's pinched face stiffened. 'Don't talk rot!' She glared at Leon's father. 'Ames, is your boy as big a fool as he sounds? See it right there!' She kept pointing upwards. 'The Legiones Astartes have come!'

The youth looked to his father for support but Ames was shaking his head; and again the townsfolk were all talking at once, and whatever he said went ignored.

+++Broadcast Minus Eight Weeks [Solar]+++

The train of empty cargo capsules passed through the ultraviolet anti-bacteria field and out of the throat of the Skyhook, the complex handling claws and mag-rail points snapping back and forth. Occasional flashes of sparks and running lights cast weak, sporadic illumination inside the depot complex at the foot of the space elevator. An identical train of pods moved in the opposite direction, these ones laden with vac-sealed sheaves of freeze-dried crops. With a grind of gears, the line of six capsules mated to the ascent line and they

rose up the steep ramp until the train was moving vertically. The drive-head engaged and the pods raced away, up towards the night. In two hours' time, they would be in the microgravity zone of the loading station in low geostationary orbit. There, mechanical menials would unload the train and move the cargo to a staging area, ready to await the arrival of the next interstellar freighter. The operation went on without a human hand in the process.

Across the yard, the other, empty pods ground to a sudden halt as they moved beneath the unblinking eye of a terahertz-wave scanner. An alert horn hooted twice and the train shunted sideways, all six pods opening automatically. Chem-nozzles on spidery manipulator arms unfolded from the ceiling and began to probe the interiors of the capsules, coughing spurts of caustic foam into the darkened corners. The sensor had detected something inside one of the pods, and initiated a pest-control subroutine. It wasn't unknown for creatures from other biospheres to make their way through the loading–unloading process, and off-world vermin had the potential to wreck a colony's entire ecosystem.

Nothing alive was meant to find its way up or down the Skyhook, no passengers, only inert cargo. The single landing strip out in Oh-One that could be considered a space port was the sole point of contact between off-worlders and the colony, although it was very rarely used. The transports that came for the planet's bounty occasionally off-loaded supplies, but mostly they came to gather up the harvest and take it away. The crews of those vessels didn't bother to venture down to the surface; they let their cogitators handle the business of arrival and departure. No one wanted to stay near Virger-Mos II any longer than they had to.

The nozzles found their target and bracketed it with bursts of hot liquid; but the life-form inside walked through the boiling rain and clambered out onto the floor of the depot. The automated system was not programmed to anticipate anything like intelligent behaviour from a xenos pest, and so did nothing as the man doffed the plastoid oversuit that had protected him from the chill, folding it away in a case on his back.

He removed the backpack and separated it into two discrete sub-cases, and after a few minutes of preparation, he walked on. The new arrival casually made his way across the depot, taking care to skirt the autonomous loaders, until he reached one of the few human-accessible maintenance bays. It hadn't been used in decades, and it was an effort to get the doors open; but once he was done, the man was able to make his way out of the facility and onto the mainway.

Because his masters had trained him exceptionally well, no one in Town Forty-Four saw him; at least, not until he wanted them to.

He'd changed into a commonplace, but well appointed, traveller's robe, and after crossing around the edge of the township, he doubled back and approached from the east. He would appear to be walking in from across the plainslands, out of the warm, dusty evening.

It wasn't necessary for him to ask directions or even consult the detailed topographic map copied from the files of the Departmento Terra Colonia. Every town like this one was the same; not in a literal sense, not in the manner of the lay of roads and of houses, but in character. The dynamic of the settlement matched those on dozens of other human worlds; the *personality* of the place, for want of a better word, was alike.

Even as Mendacs let himself be drawn towards the lights and the noise coming from the tavern, he was opening up his senses to Town Forty-Four. He wanted to know it; and in many ways, he already did.

He entered the hostelry and was immediately aware of every eye upon him. That came as no surprise; an unannounced visitor in a remote township such as this one was akin to a minor miracle. Even as he crossed the room to the auto-bar on the far side, conversations were starting up, loaded with speculation about who he was or where he might be from.

He ordered a bottle of a coarse local beer from the mechanical tending the counter, and waited for the first of them to gather enough courage to approach. He took care pouring the ale into a glass, using the moment to discreetly survey the room. There were pushpull chairs and gaming tables here and there. Regicide seemed popular in this place, and that was good; it gave him a point of commonality with the locals that he could exploit.

Perhaps a third of the beer was gone when, at last, a man spoke to him. 'Pardon, esquire,' he began, inclining his head. 'Silas Cincade. Can I ask if you're from the Tolliver ranches?'

It was a poorly concealed gambit intended to draw him out, but it was exactly what he wanted. 'I'm afraid not,' he replied, with a smile. 'My name is Mendacs. I'm, ah, passing through.'

'Oh, I see,' said Cincade, although it was clear he didn't. 'Have you ridden in? I have stables for any rovers.' Mendacs caught the aroma of engine oil on the man.

He gave a shake of the head. 'I walked. From the next settlement.'

Cincade's eyes widened. 'From Two-Six? That's quite a hike!'

'Two-Six,' Mendacs repeated, with a nod. 'It is. And dry with it.' He gently modified his tone, dropping the softer, more educated manner of a core worlder to emulate something closer to the rough-edged vowels of the mechanic's colonist accent. 'I admit it gave me a thirst.' He saluted with the beer, and Cincade nodded back with a knowing smirk, ordering the same for himself.

'Cuts the dust, that's truth.'

Mendacs saw that Cincade's compatriots – a chubby man, a youth and a dour fellow in a tunic – were sat around a gaming table, trying not to appear interested in the newcomer. 'I'd like to take the weight off me,' he went on, gesturing at the bags he carried. 'Get a little distraction into the bargain.'

'Games?' Cincade raised an eyebrow. 'Do you play castles, then?' It was a common variant of Regicide that dated back to before

the Great Crusade, and Mendacs did indeed know it, along with many ways to cheat himself into the winner's circle.

He nodded. 'I dabble.'

Cincade was already walking away. 'We got a spare seat over here. Come join, if you'd like.'

'Absolutely.' Mendacs gathered up his drink and followed.

Within a couple of hours, he had slowly allowed himself to lose a small amount of Imperial scrip, and the looks on the faces of Cincade and his associates when Mendacs offered to cover the loss with a single gold Throne told him what he wanted to know. He tossed the coin onto the board and watched the pattern of their thoughts on their faces.

The chubby one, Prael, fancied himself as something of an authority on everything, but in reality he was an abrasive personality, self-important and priggish. Mendacs doubted that the others seated around the table would have spent any time with him, had this not been a small town where they couldn't avoid his company and the reactions any snub might create. The dour man, Kyyter, almost licked his lips to see the coin; but the youth, his son, showed a very different kind of greed. Mendacs could see the boy was withdrawn among the men, and starved for anything of interest.

They were chatting amiably now, like good friends known for years and years. It was a gift, to be able to read people as he could. As easy as breathing, Mendacs was deft at drawing others into what seemed like polite, casual conversation. The fact was, people liked to talk about themselves, and they would often do so if only one would give them opportunity and impetus.

Only the boy kept probing at him; and after a while, Mendacs knew it was time to give up a little of his own mystery.

'I'm travelling the outer colonies all across the Dominion of Storms,' he explained. 'I'm a remembrancer.' He glanced at the youth. 'Do you know that term, Leon?'

He got a vigorous nod in return. 'You're creating artworks for the Administratum. Documenting the glory of the Imperium.'

'The glory?' said Ames, with a half-smirk that didn't mask the true acid beneath it. 'There's not much of that hereabouts, I'll mark you.'

'Respectfully, I disagree,' said Mendacs. 'The golden oceans of grain, the perfect blue of your skies… Oh, sir, there is beauty here. And it would do well for those who walk the halls of Terra to know of it.'

'You… You have been to Terra?' Leon asked, awed by the idea.

Mendacs knew he had the youth then. 'My young friend, I was born there.'

'Is that so?' said Prael. 'Is it like they say?'

He gave a solemn nod, building the drama of the moment. 'It is all that and more, Esquire Prael.'

'C–can you tell us about… it?' Leon leaned forwards intently, hanging on his every word.

'About what?'

'About all of it!' The youth's excitement crackled. 'I've always wanted to see the Sol system!'

Mendacs gave the boy an indulgent smile, and a worldly, inclusive nod to the other men. 'I plan to stay here a while. I'm sure I could tell you a few things.'

Behind him, the tavern door opened, and the room fell silent again for a brief instant. Mendacs turned to see a severe-looking man in a mandarin cap and grey robes striding across the floor. People began to turn their chairs out to face him as he crossed to the bar.

'Oren Yacio,' explained Ames. 'He's the telegraphist here. Brings the regular weekly news broadcast from the wires.'

'It's a good place to play it,' Prael noted. 'We don't have wires to individual houses here, like they do in Two-Six or the capital. Anyhow, not like there's anywhere else for folks to spend an evening hereabouts, neh?'

'Interesting.' Mendacs watched as Yacio fed a fat data spool into a console near the bar.

The telegraphist cleared his throat. 'On this day, news from the core reaches the agricultural colony of Virger-Mos II. This is Terra calling.' He pressed a control with a flourish, and from hidden speakers in the ceiling, a synthetic-sounding voice began to speak.

Along with everyone else, Mendacs sat silently and listened to the steady stream of pro-Imperial propaganda. *All is well. The turncoat Warmaster is being beaten back. There are victories at Calth and Mertiol and Signus Prime. You have nothing to fear. The Emperor will be victorious.*

He smiled as he watched them listen, and in a little way he was disappointed. He wouldn't be challenged here. This would be as simple as all the others.

After the spool was concluded, the conversation went on about the contents of the broadcast, and Mendacs saw the nothings and the disinformation taken in by everyone in the tavern as if it were the word of unquestioned truth. He feigned fatigue, and it was then Ames made mention that he had rooms to rent. A couple more gold Thrones sealed the deal, and the cheerless man ordered his son to escort the remembrancer back to the dormitory house.

Leon almost fell over himself in eagerness to carry Mendacs's baggage, and together the pair of them walked back along the mainway. Night had drawn close in the meantime, and the air was crisp and cold.

'Just you and your father here, then?' he asked.

The youth nodded. 'The blackcough took my Ma a couple of seasons back.'

'I'm sorry.'

'Thanks.' Leon's head bobbed. He didn't want to dwell on that. 'Where in Terra where you born? Was it Merica, or Hy-Brasil?

Bania?'

'Do you know the Atalantic ranges? I grew up in a town a bit like this one, although the landscape was quite different.' It was an infrequent truth in his arsenal of lies, but then such details always served as the bedrock of a firm legend.

'I do, I do!' Leon talked about the great plains of the long-dead ocean and the mountains that bisected it, with the enthusiasm of a devotee. He repeated rote descriptions, and Mendacs imagined that the boy was recalling the pages of pict-books he had read a hundred times over. He began a steady bombardment of questions that carried them all the way down the street. *Had Mendacs ever been to Luna? The Petitioner's City? What was it like to look upon the Imperial Palace? Had he ever seen a Space Marine?*

'I've been in the presence of the Legiones Astartes, more than once.' A primarch, too, although that fact he kept to himself. 'They're like gods of war made of flesh and metal. Terrible and beautiful.'

Leon let out an awed, hushed breath. 'I should like to see them too.'

'Are you certain of that?' Mendacs asked, as they entered the dormitory house. 'Where they walk, only war follows. It is what they are made for.' The boy would be his barometer, he decided. Through him, he would be able to take the measure of the mood of the community, and by extension, the entire colony.

The youth swallowed hard. 'I've read much about them. I wonder…' He caught himself and stopped, halting by the door to the guest room.

'Wonder what?' Mendacs asked, as he took the key rod from Leon's outstretched hand.

Leon took a deep breath. 'How can they fight each other? Brother against brother? It makes no sense!'

'It does to Horus Lupercal.'

The name actually made the boy flinch. 'How?' he repeated. 'What madness sunders the Legions and makes them attack one another? More than two solar years now, and the conflict rages on with no end in sight. Even out here, word of the war is never far away.' He shook his head. 'The holocaust of Isstvan and all that followed could only be the work of one turned insane!'

Mendacs took his bags and entered the room. 'I would not even try to guess,' he said. 'Don't try to map the thoughts and ways of men to the Legiones Astartes, Leon. They are not like us.' Unbidden, a note of rare, honest awe crept into his voice. 'They are an order of magnitude beyond our crude humanity.'

He closed the door to the room and stood in silence, listening until he was sure the boy was gone. Then he spent another hour moving around the suite by lamplight with an auspex in his hand, letting the device sniff the air for electromagnetic waves, thermal patterns or anything else that might indicate the presence of a listening device. Mendacs knew he would find nothing, but it was good tradecraft to make the sweep. The habits of espionage were what kept his kind alive, in the end.

He placed his baggage and clothes, settling himself in the room. It was actually better accommodation than he was expecting, modest but comfortable. He recognised the old touches of a woman's hand, now ill-cared for. A remnant of the dead mother's influence.

When he was ready, Mendacs opened up the smaller valise case and disengaged the thin hide-panels over the real contents. He worked a crystal control and set the systems inside to a waking mode. The autonomous cogitator programs inside the mechanisms would run a series of tests to ensure the unit was in full working order, but he expected no problems. The unit was highly resilient.

As the device chimed to itself, Mendacs opened his tunic and drew out the small witness rod secreted in an inner pocket, and disconnected it from the microphone head fitted into his cuff. He unfolded a disc-shaped panel from the rod to manipulate the recording, cutting it into a rough edit for transfer. He had all of Yacio's broadcast copied on there, the voice and the template sampled in near-flawless detail. When the unit was done, he inserted the rod into a data port and let the recording migrate.

The valise's innards were a suite of advanced microelectronics and crystallographic matrices; it was capable of many functions: vox communications, variable range narrow/broadcast, frequency jamming, countermeasures, simulation, data parsing, and more. He doubted anyone on Virger-Mos II could even comprehend the true potential of the unit; even in the core worlds, technology of this kind was both rare and prohibited.

The rod gave off a soft ping and he removed it, unfolding a screen from the inside of the valise to examine the waveforms of the artificially generated voice. Mendacs paused, examining the pattern in the way an artist might view a blank canvas before committing the first brushstroke.

He paused; it was dry and warm, and the task he was about to perform would take a while. He shrugged off his tunic and rolled up the sleeves of his undershirt, making himself comfortable before he picked up his edit-stylus.

If anyone had been in the room with Mendacs, as he moved they might have briefly glimpsed an icon tattooed on the inside of his forearm; in green ink, the symbol of a mythic hydra, its tail raised and three heads rearing back in fanged defiance.

+++Broadcast Plus Eleven Hours [Solar]+++

A dust storm was brewing far out on the plains, and while it was too distant from Forty-Four to cause any damage, the trailing edges of it were brushing the outskirts of the town, darkening the sky and pushing ripples of grit down the streets.

Some of the people who assembled outside the telegraph station had goggles and masks dangling about their necks in readiness; others already wearing them. Along with the masks, there was a ready profusion in the number of weapons that were being worn openly.

Mostly, they were low-calibre stubber rifles and shot-rods used for keeping down the population of grain vermin. Some had farming implements, although what enemy they hoped to defend against was unclear. It was more a matter of the weapons being there to soothe the ones who carried them, rather than being of any actual use in a confrontation.

Dallon Prael had the only thing that could be considered a 'modern' weapon, and even that definition stretched credibility. The laslock rifle he held tightly was over a hundred and forty years old, bequeathed to the Prael family by a great-great-grandmother who had served with honour in the Imperial Army. The relic gleamed in the lamplight, and the fat man carried it as if it were his badge of office.

Town Forty-Four had never had a constable; there had never been the need, what with a circuit lawman from Oh-One passing through once a lunar. But Prael fancied himself as some kind of just man, as if the owning of the rifle made him heir to that office.

He glanced at Ames Kyyter, who stood with his perpetually grim expression glaring hard over his folded arms. The dormitory owner gave a sullen nod. 'Is there a purpose to this gathering?'

Prael cast around. No one had made any announcement, but still the majority of the township was represented here, faces from almost all the families that lived inside the dominions. Those that were not here were being debated on by the rest of them, their names taken in vain. After all, if you didn't stand up and be counted, then you had to be hiding something, didn't you? You had to be afraid to take a side.

Nobody had done anything so foolish as to lay a blow on another or rattle their weapon, but it was getting close to that. Questions and disagreements were reaching a head, fierce discussions building into simmering rage. Prael listened, venturing an interruption when he thought he was in the right and likely to be agreed with. All the talk broke down into two opposing viewpoints and the schism was growing larger with each passing moment. Rather than building consensus, the impromptu town meeting was widening the cracks.

If the Emperor was truly dead, so some were saying, then what did that mean to the people of the colony, of this township? What did it *really* mean?

Prael had no doubt in his mind that the message on the telegraph was authentic. After all, there were mechanisms in place to make sure that the astropathic signals from the Sol system and the core worlds were immune to distortion. He had been told this by other broadcasts and he believed it. He didn't need to know how that worked, only that it did. Although he disliked the religionist nature of the word, he had *faith*.

The message said the Emperor was dead; *so he was*. And where did a man like Dallon Prael go from there? Horus would be on the throne of Earth now, and he would be gathering his new empire to him. They all knew the stories of the worlds razed to ash for daring to show defiance to the Warmaster – like the planets of the Taebian Stars and other nearby sub-sectors, burned and left as dead balls of stone.

Some voices called for submission, for the intelligent, logical course of action. They wanted to put up the flag of the Warmaster, fly the Eye of Horus on every pennant. What other way was there to save themselves, if not declaring their loyalty to the new Imperator Rex? If they chose otherwise, when the Legiones Astartes finally arrived, they would be put to the sword en masse.

Others showed disgust at such an idea. This was an Imperial world, after all. Founded by Terra and the Emperor, brought to life by Imperial will, from the sweat of the brow of Imperial citizens and in service to the Imperium of Man. A loyal world of loyal colonials who should rightly spit hate in the eye of a turncoat murderer like Horus Lupercal.

Prael listened to the arguments fly to and fro, and held his own tongue. The Virger-Mos system was so very far from Terra, so isolated and remote that it was barely part of the Imperium, just in name and manner only. He dared to ask himself the question – *would it matter?*

How would it matter to a world like this one *who* ruled from a distant Earth? Horus or the Emperor? What possible difference could it make? They would still grow their grain and ship it out, they would still be born and toil and die under the shadow of the Skyhook. The only change would be the colours on the flag and the voice on the broadcasts.

So, was his fealty that cheap? Was the loyalty of a single colony to its birthworld so fragile and meaningless, that it could be broken by some lights in the sky and the phantom threat of a reprisal?

'We can't just roll over like dogs!' Prael startled himself by letting the thought take voice in a sudden outburst. His eyes misted with the force of his emotion, suddenly given a release. 'Are we that weak?'

'It's not weakness, it's pragmatism!' Ames Kyyter shot back an angry retort, backed by a handful of nodding people. 'It means nothing to us whose backside lies on the Throne of Terra! So we say a different oath, so what? At least we live! I'm not going to lose all I have in the name of someone I have never seen, someone who doesn't even know this planet exists!'

Prael took a threatening step towards the other man. 'You don't understand!'

'It might not even be Horus, did you think of that?' Ames retorted. 'Maybe it's the remnants of the Emperor's stalwarts, come here to make planetfall!'

Behind them, the door to the telegraph office slammed open and Oren Yacio came out, moving woodenly, his face drained of colour. He still had the complex set of headphones in his hands, the ones he wore while he worked at the telegraphic console. A loose wire trailed after him, dangling from an implant in the back of his neck.

No one spoke as Yacio took the steps down to the road, blank-faced and sweaty. The only sound was the rattle and twang of the cables over their heads as the touch of the distant storm-winds brushed over them.

Finally, the telegraphist spoke, raising his voice to be heard. 'On this day, news from… News reaches the colony...' He was trying to keep a professional tone to his words, but he failed. Yacio swallowed and began again, eschewing his normal air of formality. 'A fragmentary broadcast has come across the wires. It was piecemeal and it took me many hours to reassemble it. Sporadic reports from

Oh-Nine, One-Five and the capital.'

'The drop-pods,' asked a woman. 'Is it the Sons of Horus?'

A torrent of other questions erupted after her, and Yacio waved his hands and let out a screech. '*Quiet*! Quiet! Listen to me!' He shivered despite the warmth of the night air. 'It is my duty to tell you all that his honour Esquire Lian Toshack, Imperial Governor-Select of the Virger-Mos colony, took his own life this day in his chambers. There… There is confusion about how next to proceed.'

A ripple of reaction crossed through the small crowd. Prael said nothing, his sweaty fingers kneading the frame of the laslock. Toshack had killed himself rather than face the invasion. How many others would do the same, too terrified of the Warmaster to even bear the thought of facing his Legions?

'There's more,' Yacio went on, shaken by the portent of his news. 'Other townships are passing on unconfirmed reports of… of *sightings*.' He licked his lips. 'Massive figures in dark armour have been seen advancing from town to town. Those settlements that sent such reports have all gone off the wire shortly afterwards.'

'Space Marines,' breathed Ames. 'Throne and blood, they're really here.' He nodded to himself with the bleak solemnity of a man standing before the executioner's block. 'I knew it.'

'No!' Prael snapped. 'No, we don't know!' He grabbed Yacio's arm. 'You said "unconfirmed". That means this could be some kind of mistake, or–'

'Open your eyes!' screamed the woman. 'We are invaded, you idiot!' Her words were like a match to kindling, and everyone on the street was shouting and wailing.

Panic hit Prael like a wave, and he felt the mood of the townsfolk crumbling. He knew that if he didn't act now, the whole settlement would fall apart. With a grunt of effort, he hauled himself up onto the hood of a parked trailer and waved the laslock in the air, filling his lungs to shout.

'Listen to me!' he bellowed, drawing their attention. 'I have lived my life in this township, just like all of you! And the blight can take Horus Lupercal for all I care!' He shook the rifle, finding a new reservoir of will inside himself. 'I will die before I allow that traitor bastard and his turncoat whoresons to take my home from me! I'd rather burn than surrender!'

His blunt, forceful oratory got him a ragged chorus of cheers from those in the crowd who felt the same, but there was still a sizeable number who looked on, sneering at his words.

And just then, from his higher vantage point, Prael saw something coming. Lights, bobbing as they moved, and the sound of an engine behind them. Something dark and large caught in the nimbus of the storm, coming down the mainway from the edge of town.

'It's them!' screamed a voice. 'They're already here!'

The crowd scattered, some of them stumbling over one another in wild haste, others fleeing to find anything that approximated cover.

The motions of his hands were automatic; Prael found the laslock coming up to his shoulder, his eye peering down the iron sights. The training and the days of vermin-shooting with a slug-thrower snapped back to him. The old laser rifle warmed up and went live. His finger was on the knurled trigger-plate.

The dark shapes were closing in, riding on a plume of windborne dust. Prael wondered what was out there, behind those lights. An armoured tank, a cross-terrain vehicle? Perhaps lines of Legiones Astartes walking single file? He'd heard they did that to hide their numbers.

'Prael!' Ames was shouting at him, trying to pull him off the trailer. 'Get down from there, you worthless idiot! You'll be the death of us all! Put down the bloody gun before they see you!'

In all his life, Dallon Prael had wanted to be something. To be more than just a solarman, to have his existence matter. No, more than that. He wanted to be a hero.

His finger tightened on the trigger-plate. He *would* be a hero. Even if he had to die to do it. He would teach these invaders a lesson.

The laslock released a pulse of brilliant red light with a shriek of split air, and the shot hit the mark Prael had made for it.

He let out a breath and felt suddenly dizzy. He waited for the reprisal. And waited.

The wind and dust went on and brushed past him with a crackle of grit, and Prael stumbled down, advancing towards his aim point. Acrid smoke curled in the air and he smelled burned flesh.

He stopped, and found himself looking at Silas Cincade's corpse, lying where the body had been blown out of the saddle of an idling rover trike. A good quarter of the mechanic's face was a blackened ruin of meat, where the las-bolt had hit just above his right eye.

Prael started shaking, the rifle falling from his nerveless fingers.

In the end, it fell to Yacio to approximate something approaching organisation. While Prael went to pieces, weeping like a child, the telegraphist called on the townsfolk to find whatever they could to barricade the roads in and out of Town Forty-Four. They obeyed, mostly out of the need to feel like they were doing something that mattered instead of just waiting to die.

Cincade's body was taken, and somebody got the laslock away from Prael. The mechanic had ridden to Oh-One in search of information, and now they would never know what he had to tell them; most of the town had already assumed Silas to be dead anyway, fearful that the wandering invaders out there in the fields would have killed him before he ever reached the capital beyond the horizon.

Yacio warned them that the Legiones Astartes *would* come here. It was inevitable. The Skyhook was here, and that made it a tactical location. They had to protect it – either from an invading army come to plant its flag or for a brigade of defenders come to protect them from a heartless dictator. The space elevator was all they had that might be able to keep them alive.

What troubled Oren Yacio the most was the question of what he would do when he finally learned who had arrived on Virger-Mos II. The forces of the Emperor, or the Legions of Horus?

Did it actually matter?

+++Broadcast Minus Two Weeks [Solar]+++

The title of the book was *Insignum Astartes: The Uniforms and Regalia of the Space Marines*, and it was a real tome in the traditional sense of the word. Not a pict-book to be read by a data-slate, but a physical object made of plaspaper, like the ones his mother had always favoured.

Leon took great care with it, as the binding was old and the pages uneven where the glue holding them in place had yellowed and gone to powder.

He looked over age-dulled images of armoured warriors, captured by picters or rendered in artwork as they strode battlefields like mythic storm-lords. He knew the representations intimately, every shade and line and colour. He knew every word in the book by heart. The careworn pages showed details of Legion sigils, banners and insignia, basic facts on the nature of the Legiones Astartes and their battle doctrines. The book smelled of age and solemnity. At his feet, hand-drawn sketches that were full of painstaking detail, rendered on scraps of butcher's paper, lay in an untidy pile beneath his bed.

Leon's scribblings were crude in comparison to the illustrations in the book, but still he poured his full measure of intent into them. The best of his work – such as it was – was pinned to the walls of his small, narrow bedroom, along with yellowing newsprint clippings and pages kept from leaflets provided by the colonial authorities. The rest of his books and spools of picts lay on plastic shelves above his bed. They jostled for space with a collection of figurines, some stamped from metal and brightly painted, others formed from off-cuts of wood that Leon had carved himself. The youth's room was, in its own way, a dedication to the great dreams of the Emperor and his warriors, to their glory and the glory of humanity.

Pride of place went to a single cylinder made of heavy-gauge brass, polished to a bright sheen: the spent casing of a bolt shell. He put down the book and reached for it, taking the case between thumb and forefinger, turning it so it caught the light. Not for the first time, Leon wondered where the shot it contained had been fired. He tried to picture the mass-reactive shell head and the damage it would have wrought on impact. *Who died for the sake of this?* He asked the question in silence. Leon tried to imagine himself there in that moment, looking on as the round took the life of an enemy of the Imperium.

The door to his room opened and Leon jerked, startled from his reverie. He'd been so engrossed in his own thoughts he hadn't heard his father's approach; certainly the man would never give him the grace to knock before entering.

Immediately, he saw the shell casing in Leon's hand and his expression soured. 'I can see you're busy.'

Leon coloured, feeling foolish. 'What's wrong?' He fumbled with the casing, unsure where to put it. The man who sold it to him had taken a high price for it, and Ames had beat him when he learned how much scrip he had 'wasted'; but the casing had fallen from the ejection port of a Space Marine's bolter, and owning it made Leon Kyyter feel somehow connected to the warrior kindred he saw in the books.

'It's worthless, you know that, don't you?' Leon's father pointed at the brass cylinder. 'It was probably picked from the mud beneath the boots of some idiot in the Imperial Army, if that. That shell's never been within a light-year of a Space Marine.' He glanced around the room disapprovingly, as he always did.

Leon kept his silence. He didn't care to believe what Ames said. In his eyes, the casing was real and true, and that was all that mattered.

'I'll never comprehend why you hold so much interest for…' He sneered at the crude drawings on the walls and the metal figures. 'For all *this*.' Bitterness clouded his father's tone. 'The Space Marines, the Emperor, all of them… They don't care about you as much as you care about them. Terra thinks nothing of Virger-Mos or the people who live here. I keep wondering when you're going to grow up and realise that.'

Still, Leon said nothing. He didn't want to repeat the same pointless argument they had fought a hundred times over.

Ames tapped a picture of the Imperial Palace cut from a pamphlet, the edges of it curling inwards. 'I know you think that one day you'll go see this for real. But sooner or later, you have to learn that won't happen. It's a fantasy, son. You were born here, and you'll die here. And the Imperium will go on without you. It won't care.'

'What do you want?' Leon said, at last.

His father frowned and turned away. 'Do something useful. Take the kitchen remains to the burner.'

Leon waited until he was gone, and then replaced the shell. He put the copy of the *Insignum Astartes* back on the shelf, where it would be pressed flat and kept safe, and then dolefully took up the duty he had been given.

He walked across the dusty patch of grass behind the dormitory house to where the maw of the burner protruded from its underground hollow, and kicked the grate open with his feet. Leon let his mind wander, pretending instead he was on Terra, walking the halls of the Emperor's Palace; but then the stink of the burner reached him and the pleasant illusion was destroyed. Scowling, he poured the pail of slops into the drop tube and let the furnace start its work.

Through habit, he looked up at the Skyhook. At this time of day, the sun was throwing the space elevator's shadow directly over the building.

In the shade, Leon found Esquire Mendacs sitting cross-legged on the grass with a water flask and a cloth bag at his side. The remembrancer was working at a pict-screen, moving a stylus across it. He saw the youth and threw him a wan smile, beckoning him over.

He left the pail and wiped his hands on the thighs of his trousers. 'Beg pardon, esquire,' Leon said as he came closer. 'If I smell a little. The kitchen remains, I was just disposing of them.'

Mendacs nodded. 'It doesn't notice. Are you well, Leon?'

'Well enough.' He nodded at the hand-held screen. 'What is that you're doing there?'

'See for yourself.' Mendacs offered him the device, and Leon took it gingerly, cautious not to touch any of the tabs or buttons around the pict-screen's frame.

A half-finished image was centred in the middle of the display, a line sketch of the township from the shallow rise where the dormitory house sat. The rise of the Skyhook dominated the drawing.

Leon felt a brief flash of jealousy. Mendacs's skill with the pen was an order of magnitude beyond the youth's crude attempts, and even the incomplete piece here made his scribblings look like the work of an infant. He nodded. 'It's impressive.'

'It will be the basis for a digi-painting, perhaps,' Mendacs said airily. 'We'll see when I'm finished with it.'

When Leon didn't answer, the remembrancer's expression shifted and he frowned. The other man's cool, steady gaze seemed to bore straight into the youth, and he wanted to look away.

'Your father…' Mendacs paused, feeling for the right words. 'He doesn't seem to have an appreciation for art.'

Leon gave a glum nod. 'Aye.'

'Your mother did, though.'

'How did you know that?'

Mendacs smiled. 'Because *you* do, Leon. And because there are still traces of her lingering in your home.' He stopped, suddenly concerned. 'Forgive me. Am I speaking out of turn?'

Leon shook his head. 'No, no. You're exactly right.' He sighed. 'I'd like to have the talent that you do, but I don't.'

'I'm sure your skills are balanced in other ways,' offered the remembrancer.

'My Da doesn't seem to think so.'

Mendacs studied him. 'Fathers and sons always have a fractious relationship. This is a truth that spans the galaxy. One pulls against the other… one rebels, defies… The other tries to hold on to the old order of things, against reason.'

'We don't see eye to eye,' Leon sighed. 'He thinks the Imperium ignores us out here on the periphery. He tells me that it's all far away and unreachable. Terra, and all those things.'

'That is as much true as it is false,' said Mendacs, 'but I imagine Esquire Kyyter would not hear that.' He leaned in. 'Do you think he is right?'

'No,' Leon answered immediately. His temper began a slow burn. 'He doesn't see what I see. He's blind, too set in his ways. And he wants me to follow in his footsteps. I've tried to get him to see things like I do, but he doesn't want to hear it. He thinks…' The young man paused. 'I think he believes I'm turning on him.'

'A traitor to your kin.' Mendacs said the words without weight. 'It's strange, isn't it? How fathers and sons can be so close but at the same time be so far apart?' He paused and looked away. 'Do you imagine that Horus Lupercal shared a measure of what you feel now, Leon?'

'What?' The question came from nowhere, and in its wake Leon felt unsettled. 'No! I mean...' He stopped and shook his head. 'The Emperor and the primarchs are not like us.' The idea seemed ludicrous.

'No?' Mendacs went back to his sketching, the stylus moving over the screen in small flicks of motion. 'Even those who transcend humanity must stem from it. The bonds of family, of brotherhood and fatherhood… They still exist in them. They cannot escape such truths.' The remembrancer looked back at him. 'Just like you, Leon. It is something that all men must face. The question: *May I defy my father*?'

'The Warmaster's defiance has cost the lives of millions,' Leon blurted.

Mendacs looked away again. 'All choices have their price.'

+++Broadcast Plus Twenty-Two Hours [Solar]+++

Leon crouched by the windowsill, the lights in his room doused, straining to listen. From the township proper, the sounds of breaking glass and the crack of gunfire echoed up towards him. He felt hollow inside, watching the plumes of black smoke rising into the night sky. The faint glow of fires was visible through the lines of the alleyways; he guessed that the general store was burning, but he couldn't understand why anyone would have wanted to put it to the torch.

It was hours since his father had left, ordering him on no account to leave the dormitory house. Ames didn't know that his son had seen him pick up the revolver he hid in the cellar, and tuck it into his waistband before he went. Leon tried to understand what that might

mean. Why would his Da need a weapon, unless he knew that danger was coming to Forty-Four? Or was there another reason? Another kind of threat?

Leon's hands knitted and he looked around the room, the faint light throwing shadows over his pictures. He wanted to *do* something, but he didn't know what it might be. None of his books or his drawings could give him any kind of answer.

Then he heard the door close downstairs. Leon blinked and peered back out of the window; that seemed wrong. Had his father returned?

Instead, he saw a shape in motion through the places where the light from the township didn't fall, slipping away from the house. The figure was careful to stay in the shadows at all times, never once passing into the light.

It could only have been Mendacs; but the man moved in a way Leon had never seen before, almost as if his entire body language had gone through a subtle shift. On an impulse he couldn't quite grasp, the youth scrambled to his feet and went after him.

The remembrancer's course skirted the edges of the township, and having lived his entire life within its confines, Leon soon knew where Mendacs was heading. The alleyways and cut-backs the man took were part of the map of the youth's world, places where he had run as a child and played at games of Great Crusade with his friends.

Mendacs was heading for the base of the Skyhook, and his path avoided all the places where the citizens of Forty-Four were gathered. Keeping his distance, Leon tried not to let the sights around him distract him from the follow; but it was not easy to put aside the sounds of the fires and the screaming.

At the corner of the Adjunct, some men had been hung from the lamp posts, and they swayed in the wind, the fibre cord about their necks creaking. Leon recognised faces from the tavern up there, now bloated and pale. Along the top of the mainway, it looked as if people had built barricades, although he was too far away to be sure. Once or twice he spied small groups of people armed with anything that could be turned into a weapon, some stalking the streets, others hiding in wait as if looking for something to ambush. Windows were stove in on some houses; he saw one with the name of the Warmaster daubed across the front door. He couldn't tell if it was as a warning or as a mark of hate. And at the westerly point, a telegraph pole had been cut down with chainsaws, lying where it fell with a mess of torn wires about the head of it.

Leon lost sight of Mendacs as the remembrancer approached the service block at the foot of the space elevator. He was distracted by a moment of angry shouting between two men that ended abruptly in the blast of a shot-rod. One of the voices was familiar to him: Kal Muudus, a neighbour from a few doors down the lane. He was yelling something about the Emperor, but his words were barely coherent.

A moment of real fear washed over Leon and it took all his will to stay where he was in the shadows, and not run pell-mell back to the dormitory house.

He stiffened, digging deep to find what small measure of courage he had. Leon's world was collapsing around him as the day drew on, and in this instant of understanding, he questioned if Esquire Mendacs might have something to do with it. The tensions and unspoken discord between the settlers of Town Forty-Four had been there before Mendacs had arrived; but it was only after he came that they bubbled to the surface. Only after the remembrancer had taken residence had the darkness of the Great War out there seemed to reach its inky fingers towards the colony.

Leon drew himself up and sprinted the distance to the service blockhouse. The door was locked shut, but there was a narrow vent shaft up above it that the youth was skinny enough to enter.

He expected to be bombarded by the screams of alarms, but Leon dropped to the floor with only the clatter of his boots on the deck. He shrank into cover behind a cargo rig, but the sound of his arrival was lost in the steady background noise of the Skyhook's inner workings.

Even with the troubles in Town Forty-Four, the mechanised elevator went on regardless, ignoring the human drama beyond as it continually ferried trains of cargo capsules up to the orbital transfer station. A part of Leon was dazzled by his own daring at penetrating the blockhouse, and doing it with so little effort – but then he recalled that everyone in the settlement had been drilled with the warning never to enter the chambers within. Not only would the machines in there likely kill them by accident, but to do so was a violation of the colonial charter. Those found guilty of that were reclassified as indentured helots and sent to the frozen polar zones, to work off a decade or two on a punishment detail. Fear of that reprisal had kept the place sacrosanct.

Now he was inside, Leon was fascinated by what he saw, the motion of the mech-arms, the rail points and the pod-trains. If an ant could have crawled inside a working rover engine, it might have experienced the same sights and sounds.

Movement drew his eye to a line of six empty capsules, their gull-wing hatches all open. At the front of the line, Mendacs was leaning over a control console, working at buttons and switches with deft, singular focus. At once, a siren gave a low hoot, and the train began to move forwards, the hatches slowly dropping to seal shut. Mendacs grabbed his bags and threw them into the closest pod, before stepping in after.

Leon came up out of the shadow as the train pulled away, the gaps left by the hatch doors growing smaller every second. He knew where the pods would be going, where Mendacs had to be going. Up, to the station, and off-world.

If he did nothing, he would never know why, would never know what was happening to his town and his colony. But the risk… the risk was more than he had ever known in his life.

He took it anyway. At the last possible second, Leon sprinted to the rearmost pod of the train and ducked under the closing hatch. The pod rang as the door sealed shut with a hiss of air.

The boy felt an abrupt shock of acceleration as the train moved onto the ascent rails; and then it settled onto a vertical rise and Leon tumbled into a corner, banging his head on an inner wall. Spirals of light behind his eyes followed him into darkness.

The modified cogitator program did exactly what Mendacs wanted, shunting the cargo pods into a siding once they entered the transfer station, instead of moving the containers straight to unloading. He disembarked and gathered his gear, pausing only to throw a wry smile in the direction of the rear of the train, and then moved off.

The gravity plates in the deck of the transfer station shifted the orientation of 'up' and 'down' so that the colony was actually at his back. The platform itself, at the three-quarter point of the Skyhook's length, was a flat disc shaped like a three-lobed cog; each of the cog's teeth was an automated loading airlock for freight tenders to nuzzle to, although all but one was vacant. The vessel at the occupied airlock was greatly undersized in comparison to the grain carriers that usually made port there. It was just a simple warp-cutter, little more than a courier ship. Mendacs had been careful to dock it at the upper tier, so that anyone with a telescope on the ground would not be able to see it.

He didn't go straight to his ship. First, he dumped the baggage – he wouldn't need it for the last stage of the operation – and headed spinwards around the disc to the sealed astropath's chambers.

The laspistol he had carried on his arrival was still where he had left it, hanging by a lanyard from the hatch controls. Mendacs recovered it, checked the charge as a matter of course, and then opened the heavy steel door. He heard the crackle of the energy-dampening field as he stepped through.

Nothing had changed; the astropath's residence globe was as he'd left it, the iris hatch wide open, showing a glimpse of the padded zero-gravity space inside, the litter of debris still where it had fallen when he had been forced to pistol-whip the psyker to show the seriousness of his intent.

And the astropath herself. Still there, lying in a heap, her sallow face and mane of coiled locks staring blankly up at the ceiling. Mendacs cocked his head, watching the play of a nimbus of green-orange light that enveloped the woman, the radiance issuing from an iron box the size of a man's torso. The stasis generator had performed its function perfectly.

He bent down on one knee and examined the astropath. Behind the glitter of the stasis field, she resembled an image from a video feed frozen in mid-motion. Mendacs didn't understand the technology by which the device worked, knowing only that it could cast an envelope over a limited area, and within that barrier the passage of time slowed to a crawl. He had been on Virger-Mos II for almost two solar months, yet for the woman, only seconds would have passed. From her viewpoint, he would never have left.

Mendacs reached down and touched the control to deactivate the field. It winked out, and the psyker jerked back into life.

'Please, do not kill me!' she wailed, resuming a conversation that was weeks past and forgotten.

'I will let you live if you do something for me,' he told her. 'Send a message. Only that.'

The astropath shook her head, and he held up the laspistol, pointing it at her face. She looked away, and then sighed.

'It is not something that can be done at a whim. There must be preparations. A certain readiness is needed–'

Mendacs held up his hands. 'Don't lie to me. You can transmit at a moment's notice if need be. I'm not some Administratum tech that you wish to baffle with the mystery of your talent.' He tapped the barrel of the pistol against his temple. 'I know how you work.'

Her eyes widened. 'Without correct foundation, I could be injured! The warp eats the unprepared mind. Please, do not force me!'

She was a psyker of only minor talent; that was undeniable. The fact she was posted here, to this backwater instead of to a starship or colony of real note, confirmed that. The astropath's days would have been a lonely, tedious string of parsing news from the core and the occasional communion with a comrade aboard a passing ship. Mendacs's unexpected arrival was practically a gift.

He pressed the laspistol muzzle into her cheek and regarded her impassively. 'I have other means to send this on my ship,' he said, 'but I would prefer that you do it. If your answer remains no, this will end now.'

At last the woman gave a nod. 'Very well. To where do you wish me to speak?' Mendacs reeled off a set of spatial coordinates committed to his memory and watched in amusement as the psyker's expression became one of shock. '*There*?' she asked. 'But that is beyond the lines of… It is for *his* ears?'

Mendacs returned her nod. 'The Warmaster, yes, after a fashion.' He gestured with the gun. 'Send exactly this, no different. Seven words.'

'Tell me,' she said, glowering.

'*Mission complete. Proceeding to next target. Mendacs*.'

Leon wasn't certain what would happen next.

He had never been this close to a psyker before, never even seen one in the flesh; for blight's sake, he had never even been off the surface of his home world before this day, and now he crouched, trying to merge with the shadows out in the corridor beyond the astropath's quarters.

Awaking with a start as the cargo train came to a halt at the transfer station, the youth had been transfixed by fear, sickened almost to the point of vomiting. Everything felt strange, the pull of gravity on him unusually light, the illuminators in the ceiling too bright, the air cold and artificial-tasting.

He hid inside the pod, afraid that Mendacs would come to find him, waiting until the remembrancer's footsteps died away. When he recovered a scrap of his bravery, Leon dared to step out and follow the man on as best he could. Through trial and error, he had found his way here – but not before happening on a viewing port that presented to him the curve of his planet and the infinite void that surrounded it.

Leon looked into the blackness and had never been so terrified in all his life. He saw the dark and the fragile mass of Virger-Mos II, and suddenly realised that his father had been right all along. The universe beyond the home they knew *was* a vast and uncaring space; one glimpse of this awesome sight showed the truth of those words.

He dared to look up from his cover as Mendacs spoke his own name, holding the slim pistol in his hand on the telepath. The woman did something strange, and the air around him seemed to ripple and flex like a lens of oil. A sharp, greasy taint flowed through the chamber, prickling his skin. Leon felt a spider web touch all over his body and he almost cried out. *It was the warp*. The gossamer edges of it bleeding out from the astropath as she sent the signal.

The youth began to tremble, rocking back and forth, begging fate to make the sensation go away; and then, as quickly as it had come, it dissipated.

'It is done,' the woman was saying, her voice carrying to him. 'Traitor swine.'

Mendacs stepped back and sniffed. 'That's a very simplistic view,' he replied. 'Loyalty is an elastic concept. You'd be surprised what it can encompass, given enough impetus.'

'You will not succeed,' spat the psyker. 'I know what you are. I see the brand. *Alpha Legion*.' She pointed at his arm, where a tattoo protruded from his sleeve. 'You're the tool of monsters and turncoats. A liar, a walking falsehood!'

'I will succeed,' Mendacs countered. 'I *have* succeeded. Here, on Virger-Mos II and dozens of other worlds, all of them of similar stripe. This is not the first planet I have brought to the edge, nor the last.'

'If… If your masters come to invade, they will be made to pay for whatever they take. The Emperor's Legiones Astartes will come here and take it back!'

He shook his head, smiling slightly. 'You don't understand. Let me make it clear to you, mind-speaker. *I alone am the invasion*. And my work is done. There will be no massed attack from the stars, no bombardments and battle fleets.'

'But Horus–'

Mendacs chuckled. 'The Warmaster has more important things to do than send his men to this dreary corner of the galaxy. Are you so arrogant as to think it would be worth a primarch's effort? Do you really believe he would commit ships to the capture of *a farm*?' He spat the last words with a harsh sneer. Mendacs was warming to his subject; Leon recognised the same manner in his speech that the man had shown to the youth when speaking of his travels. 'Horus's fleet, as large as it is, cannot be everywhere at once. But to sow fear into the hearts of the loyalists, it must appear as if it *can*. Do you see? I am only one of dozens of operatives sent by Alpharius to create dissent and dissolution all across the galaxy.' He nodded. 'You are quite correct. I am indeed a liar, and one of the most potent strength. I sampled the signals you sent down to the populace, copied them, emulated them. Then it was only a matter of inserting them into the telegraph network, and letting the paranoia and petty fears of these parochial fools do the work for me. A handful of small asteroids captured from the Oort cloud and kicked into the atmosphere by automata-drones, and the fires were lit.' He flashed a grin. 'I made their sky fall.'

With each word the man said, Leon's fury had grown and grown. His terror gave way to anger, hard resentment at his betrayal. Finally, he could hold it in no more, and he burst from his cover and threw himself at Mendacs, cursing his name.

The remembrancer – no, the *spy* – let him come running, at the last moment swinging up the laspistol and using it to crack the boy across the face. Leon cried out in agony as the butt of the gun broke his nose and he tripped, stumbling to the floor.

Without pause, Mendacs turned back to the astropath and executed her, the howl of a single las-bolt resonating in the chamber as it blew through the psyker's heart and killed her instantly.

Leon scrambled backwards, bringing up his hands in a fruitless gesture of self-protection, gagging on the stink of burnt meat. Mendacs ignored him, instead stooping to pick up the box-shaped device lying on the floor. He holstered the gun and walked away.

He was almost out of the room before Leon gathered the wits to call after him. 'She was right, you are a traitor bastard! You're a mass-murderer!'

Mendacs halted on the threshold. 'That's not true, Leon. I've taken only one life since I came to this planet.' He nodded at the dead psyker. 'It's the people who are killers. People down there, in Town Forty-Four and every other place just like it. People like your father and Prael and all the rest. They let themselves be manipulated, because deep within them, they want to be right. They want to have their darkest fears come true, to validate their loathing of the lives they lead.'

'You did it all!' Leon shouted. 'You faked the drop-pods in the sky; you used those things in your case to corrupt the broadcasts… You turned neighbours against each other with your lies and propaganda!'

'I did. And I will again, and again…'

Leon's shoulders fell. 'Are… you going to kill me now?'

Mendacs shook his head. 'No. I knew you were following me. I wanted to see how far you would come.'

'Why?'

He shrugged. 'It amused me. I so rarely have a witness to the full scope of my work.' The man nodded in the direction of the transfer station core. 'You're clever enough to find a set of cargo pods on the downbound rails. They'll take you home.'

Leon climbed unsteadily to his feet. 'When I get back,' he husked, 'I will tell everyone what you have done. I'll stop you. I'll make

sure all the other worlds are warned!'

'No, you won't.' Mendacs turned away. 'You have a choice, Leon. You must swear your loyalty to Horus Lupercal and deny the Emperor's dominion. Because by the time the Skyhook carries you down to the surface, the colony of Virger-Mos II will belong to the Warmaster. Not through force of arms, but because of the weakness of the people who live there. Because they have exchanged their fear of one thing they have never seen for the fear of another.' He spared the youth one last look. 'And if you do not join them, *they* will be the ones who kill you.'

The warp-cutter detached and turned about its axis, the slower-than-light fusion engines coming online to propel the vessel up and away from the colony world.

In the cockpit module, Mendacs finished the last of the entries in his mission log, pausing to study the details of the mining outpost six light years distant where he would begin his work anew.

Content that he was prepared, he settled back into the acceleration couch and reached for the stasis field generator. He keyed the deactivation timer to trigger a week out from orbital insertion, so that he would have time to intercept the outpost's vox-transmissions and begin work on a new plan of subterfuge.

Mendacs closed his eyes and flipped the switch; to him, he would awaken a second later and begin again.

It was what he was best at.

Leon Kyyter leaned forwards and let his forehead touch the cold glassaic of the armoured viewport, his hands splayed palm open either side of his face.

He looked down, not daring to glance towards the threatening dark, watching the agri-world beneath him. Night covered the landscape, but there was light, here and there in scattered bands and broken commas of colour.

Light from the fires of burning towns, yellow-orange and hellish in shade, falling everywhere he turned his gaze.

In the cold and the silence, Leon watched the distant flames spread.

Forgotten Sons

Nick Kyme

Landfall

I

Heka'tan rose from the smoke cloud like a statue of living onyx. The woman was alive but unconscious. Grey tendrils of smoke coiled off the warrior's ebon skin from where he'd shielded her from the blast. Debris crunched underfoot – most of the ceiling, together with the lume-strip array, had collapsed. Somewhere in the crawl space above, an orange glow flickered.

The fire hadn't reached the meditation chamber yet and the billowing smoke coming through the vents was escaping upwards. At least she wouldn't choke to death on the fumes. Others might be injured, in need of rescue. The ship lurched suddenly, throwing Heka'tan against the wall. It was in its death throes now. He could feel the shuddering of the failing engines through the bulkhead, hear the whine of rapid depressurisation from the gash in the fuselage.

The door was blocked. Heka'tan felt the heat beyond it and heard the crackle of flames ravaging the adjacent corridor section. During meditation, his battle-plate was secured in the armourarium. He recalled the oaths of moment affixed to his shoulder guards and greaves. One of those vows was echoed in the onyx flesh of his naked torso too, branded eternally.

Protect the weak.

It was written in sigil-language, the ancient tongue of Nocturne. Heka'tan was born from fire on this hell-world. Rather than debilitate, the blaze invigorated him. He tore the door off its hinges, closing his eyes as the flames swept out and over him. They burned out quickly, devouring the oxygen. Heka'tan stayed anchored in place until it was done, a light tingling on his skin the only lasting evidence of the fire's touch.

A corridor stretched in front of him. The air hazed with the heat of conflagration. Again, the ship bucked. Not long now before impact. He glanced back at the woman.

The vox alongside him crackled to life, the pilot's last words.

'*...ing down. Brace... selves... impact. Emperor... preserve us...*'

Detached and calm, even in the face of imminent and violent landfall, Heka'tan found the last remark curious. It sounded almost like a prayer.

The engine drone became a scream. For a few seconds, Heka'tan remembered... The screaming, the death and blood. 'Hell made real' – they were Gravius's words. Heka'tan staggered, but not from weakness or fatigue. He staggered at the memory of it, of that place where so many had died and so much had gone wrong.

Father.

The thought was a painful one, forming unbidden.

Vulkan was alone. He was alone and surrounded. They were coming for him. He was... he...

...shook his head to banish the nightmare. The smoke in the chamber and the corridor was thickening. Heka'tan heard shouting above the roar of the flames. The desperate ship was arrowing through the sky too fast, too steep. Its sides shuddered hard, presaging a terminal impact.

A sudden change in pitch signalled the ship was coming to the end of its fiery trajectory. The hold was ahead. Heka'tan was halfway down the corridor when he realised he wouldn't make it in time. Arcadese would have to protect the others, assuming he wasn't already dead.

'I'm coming, human…' he muttered, turning on his heel and racing back through the door. At least he could save one life.

As Heka'tan embraced her, the Stormbird hit the ground with all the force of a drop-pod and the world exploded into hell and fire.

II

Earlier...

Persephia eyed her master with fear.

Hulking plates, edged with gold, sat atop his shoulders. A blade as thick and long as her arm was strapped to the warrior's thigh.

Cobalt metal armoured his form. She found only cold grey stone in the giant's eyes, glaring back at her with piercing intensity, and looked down again.

The Immortal Emperor's Legiones Astartes, His Angels of Death – no, that wasn't right – *his* Angels of Death, created to protect mankind from threats beyond the stars. A billion, billion worlds; a million, million cultures all compliant – now at war.

Who will protect us from ourselves? Persephia wondered, keeping her eyes on the shaking deck. Who will protect us from you?

War was everywhere, or so it seemed, so the propagandists, the rabble-rousers and Imperial Army press-gangers would have the galaxy believe. Where then the promised era of prosperity and peace made possible through the pre-eminent Imperium? The reality was a galaxy divided.

Join the Emperor, a distant, untouchable figure – after all, who beyond His favoured sons had ever even seen Him? – or be denounced as traitor. *Heretic*.

No, that wasn't right again.

Great pains had been taken to assert the empirical fact that the Emperor was not a god. There were no gods.

The propagators, the pamphleteers, had not been seen or heard from again. Idolatry was to be stamped out – science and reason were the future; logic would bring the human race to its apex, and yet… there were *whispers*.

And what of the other choice? Horus. Warmonger, planet-killer, ruthless demagogue of a bloody crusade allied to old religion, old faith. The smear campaign had been waged with military brutality on Terra. Vilified, demonised, Horus was a monster, a thing of childhood nightmares. How quickly the gilded could fall.

'Be still,' said the cobalt giant.

Persephia could barely hear her own thoughts above the droning engines, let alone her actual voice. The giant had heard her as easily as if they were engaged in polite conversation in a quiet room. And his voice had carried with all the force of a thunderclap.

'My lord?'

'I said, be still,' the giant repeated. He had a stylised 'U' on his chest plate. A curved helmet, with a vox-grille for a mouth and cold crimson lenses, sat mag-locked to his thigh. Even without his full complement of weapons, secure in the ship's locker, he was still formidable.

'The vessel you're riding in is a Stormbird – though, it scarcely resembles one any more – it has endured harder journeys.'

Persephia was humble and contrite. 'Yes, my lord. I'm sorry.'

Seemingly satisfied, the warrior shifted back in his grav-harness but was no less threatening. Bionics beneath his armour whirred as he moved, betraying old injuries. It was why the giant had missed out on front-line duties and part of the reason Persephia accompanied him. She had once been an artisan, but since the Edict of Dissolution her role as a remembrancer was a memory long dead. War had come to the galaxy and Persephia's talents were put to the forge like the rest of the human race.

No one wanted to remember any more.

A bout of turbulence rocked the ship, causing Persephia to stumble.

The pilot's voice came from the cockpit through the vox.

'Entering Bastion's atmosphere. Experiencing wind shear. Attempting to correct.'

Persephia's gaze alighted on the cobalt giant. His eyes were closed, his respiration barely visible in the movement of his chest.

'I am not supposed to be here, not like this.' She clenched her fists tightly, willing the turbulence to abate.

'You and I have something in common, human. Neither of us should be here. We've both been left behind.' His eyes snapped open, tainted with hurt and anger. 'Heka'tan's meditations are almost over. He will have need of his armour.' The giant closed his eyes again as the artificer moved towards the back of the ship. His sonorous voice followed her.

'Forgotten… both of us.'

III

Heka'tan was naked but for a pair of training fatigues. He had prepared the ash and the brazier. He had observed the rites and warmed the branding iron. The flame was born in the cradle, and within its blazing grasp he found purity and a sense of truth. Repressed memory came with it…

The drop-ship was taking fire from all sides. Much of its armour plating was punched through by lascannon blasts and several of its heavy bolter armaments were destroyed. Heat emanated from the interior. Shadows lurked there, of broken bodies silhouetted a visceral red from the incendiary fires inside. The guts of the ship lay strewn across the Isstvan plain where a cloying fug of smoke roiled. Hot tracer whickered through air screaming with the discharge of bolters and heavy cannon. Somewhere in the distance, by a shrouded ridgeline, an explosion blossomed.

'Ta… king… vy… ire…' The broken vox report crackled in Heka'tan's ear.

'Gravius! Is that you, brother?'

'Affir… mative, brother… aptain…'

'Fall back immediately and assume defensive postures.'

Around him, the fight was intensifying. Gunfire, scores of overlapping bolter bursts, rose to a deafening frenzy. Enemy

cohorts were massing from the east and west, and advancing on their position.

Enemy *cohorts.*

The notion was insane, a crazed nightmare brought to life on a dead world with only the dead to witness it. For surely, that's what they all were.

'Brother… aptain…' There was a pause not caused by the static interference.

Figures were resolving through the artificial fog. Their hulking forms wore the colour of hard steel, of grey unyielding metal. Iron.

The Urgall Depression was no place for a last stand. The ravine resembled a charnel field and not a place about which great deeds were sung. There would be no glory, face down in the blood-drenched tundra slain by one's own brothers.

Gravius continued and for once the link was clean. 'What's happening?'

Heka'tan had three hundred and sixty-two Legiones Astartes left in his command. They had forged a ring around the shattered drop-ship. Over half that number again was forever entombed inside their vessel, lost before the fight had even begun, a fight the brother-captain didn't understand.

'Assume defensive postures,' he answered, for want of something better, something that made sense.

The line of iron opened up with its weapons. Fusillade met fusillade as both sides engaged, hundreds of muzzle flares ripping up the smoke like jagged knives of hot light.

It was but a skirmish in a maelstrom of death. This was a battle like no other. It was a reckoning. It was a show of force. But above all else it was fratricide on an epic scale.

Heka'tan's words to Gravius sounded hollow even to him. 'Hold out as long as you can.'

It was over. Even before he'd seen the armoured column advancing behind the infantry, Heka'tan knew it. He took a round to the shoulder, the explosive impact nearly tearing off the pad and spinning him. A second struck him in the chest and he staggered.

One of his own, Ikon he thought, died to a throat wound. More followed, too numerous and rapid to count. Apothecaries were a pointless luxury during this nascent massacre. The air shimmered with the heat of shells passing so close that some struck one another and deviated from their original targets. Above, Thunderhawks and Stormbirds tried to escape. Heka'tan saw several in the livery of the Raven Guard and Iron Hands plunge from the smoke-blackened sky like broken comets. Distant explosions announced their destruction.

Bleak was not the word for their chances.

Fatalism, yes, but capitulation was not amongst Heka'tan's emotional vocabulary. Sons of Nocturne were born of sterner stock. They came from the earth and its fiery heart-blood. They would not go to Mount Deathfire with the foe unbloodied.

'Burn them!'

A wave of super-heated promethium spewed from the Salamanders' serried ranks. Several Iron Warriors fell to the flamers, first going to their knees before collapsing onto the shell-strewn earth.

It wasn't enough. More were coming. Tongues of fire spilled off their armour like bright vapour contrails. They brought autocannon and multi-lasers, Rapier and Tarantula guns.

Brother killed brother in an endless firestorm that had yet to even reach its full fury.

Now, the long turrets of the battle tanks made themselves known. It was easy to imagine skulls being crushed beneath their tracks, the slow and steady disintegration of civilisations under their massive bulk. Kill markings marred their hulls. How many would be attributed to the Salamanders Legion before this madness was done, Heka'tan wondered?

The tanks were still manoeuvring into position when the Son of N'bel fell upon the line of iron, bending it to his will. A gleaming figure surged into the Iron Warriors, distant but still magnificent. Vulkan and the Pyre Guard slammed into the betrayers with unrelenting vengeance. The primarch's hammer smashed a bloody wedge into the throng, slow to react to the flank attack.

From below, Heka'tan found it hard to keep track of his father, but saw enough to know iron helms were sundered and chestplates crushed against his wrath. A spit of flame drove the traitors back up the hill, colliding with the advancing armour. Vulkan's gauntlet engulfed them in a conflagration so intense that power armour was no defence against it.

He reached the first of the battle tanks, a Demolisher that the primarch lifted with his bare hands and turned over. A second he punched through the hull with his hammer, wrenching out the crew within before the Pyre Guard, his retinue and inner circle warriors, followed up with grenades. The back of the tank blew out in a plume of fire, smoke and shrapnel.

Then Heka'tan was running, back up the hill towards his father.

'Forward in the name of Lord Vulkan! Unto the anvil!'

The ring of three hundred took up the charge, ragged banners snapping defiantly in the icy wind. Snow turned to slush with the heat of their flamers, levelled at the crumbling line of Iron Warriors.

'Perturabo!' The voice shook the very ridgeline as deep and forbidding as a Nocturnean lava chasm. Vulkan was enraged, battering tanks aside like children's toys. He was not the most gifted swordsman, nor was he a master strategist or a psyker of any note, but his strength and fortitude… in that, the Eighteenth Primarch was unrivalled.

Had Ferrus Manus lived there might be cause for debate, but with the Iron Hands primarch's head lying separate from his body in the shrinking snow that point was now moot.

The low whine of a missile barrage cutting through the air at speed answered Vulkan and he looked to the heavens.

Heka'tan followed his primarch's gaze a second later and saw the danger too late.

Fury lit up the ridgeline, ripping tanks and bodies the same, tossing Salamanders and Iron Warriors indiscriminately. The backwash boiled down the hill in a fiery bloom, thundering into Heka'tan just as Vulkan was obliterated from his sight. Then the world faded, darkening in every sense and–

–he awoke.

Something was scratching at the Salamander's fingers. The efforts were frantic but ineffective. Heka'tan opened his eyes, still shaking. His hand was clenched around a woman's throat. Eyes narrowed, he released her.

'What are you doing here?' He rose from his haunches but the artificer backed off when he tried to approach her. She massaged her throat, trying to breathe.

The skin around her neck was already bruising and there were burn marks where Heka'tan's fingers still carried the brazier's heat.

'Brother Arcadese…'

'Should not have sent you.' Heka'tan glowered.

The artificer shook her head. 'What did I do?' She was raving a little now, afraid and a little incensed.

Heka'tan rose to his full height, and loomed over her. 'The rites of Nocturne are for Vulkan's sons alone.' There was obvious reproach in his voice. The artificer's annoyance melted away with the sudden fire blazing in the Salamander's eyes. They were red but stoked like a furnace. The effect, coupled with the warrior's ebon skin, was disturbing. 'Nor do we have use for artificers.' He would speak to Arcadese later.

'You're my first Salamander,' she admitted, mustering her courage in the face of the diabolic warrior.

'Then you're fortunate, for there are few of us left.' Heka'tan turned away. 'Now leave me. A Salamander must be *fire-touched* before battle.'

'Battle? I thought this was a diplomatic mission?'

The Salamander glared at her. 'Do I look like a diplomat to you?'

'No, my lord.'

'Don't call me that. I am not your lord, I merely am. Now, go.'

A sudden jolt through the chamber sent the artificer scurrying for footing. Heka'tan caught her. His grip was gentle this time.

A vox crackle made them both turn towards the receiver unit on the wall. The frantic voice of the pilot quickly followed.

'...vasive action... brace for... mpact!'

'Huh–' The half-formed thought was smothered by the explosion rocking the hull and the blast wave ripping through the ceiling.

Heka'tan bore down on Persephia like the coming of night.

Then came smoke and the scent of burning.

Debris

I

The sleek vessel touched down with barely a tremor. Its long silver prow shone in the setting Bastion sun, slightly at odds with the functional grey and bronze of the docking towers. This was not a sleek, smooth shipyard; it was a place of hard edges, of logical, minimalist architecture, of sprawling technological megaliths and super-rigs.

Servitors, haulers, deckers, overseers and foremen clogged companionways, thronged dizzyingly high gantries and lofty work platforms. This was industry. It was grind and solidity. This was Bastion.

Cullis was its prime-clave. A hard city, full of hard men, not just workers and engineers but military men, and it was their might and native arsenal that had afforded them choice.

No real opposition to a Legion, Bastion none the less represented an expenditure of time, a manoeuvring of resources – a surfeit that neither side was willing to commit. Armies were stretched the length and breadth of the galaxy as it was. Better to court its people with words and argument than risk turning Bastion into a wasteland that was no use to either faction.

Ortane Vorkellen knew this as he stepped onto the gangramp of his cutter, shielding his gaze against the dipping sun.

'Smells of oil and metal,' muttered Insk, his scrivener. 'Should've brought rebreathers.'

'And risk offending the natives,' Vorkellen returned in a quiet voice, his painted smile pitched perfectly for the greeting party.

A gaggle of archivists, lex-savants and codifiers followed him and Insk down the ramp as they descended to the deck floor.

'Greetings, travellers,' uttered a moustachioed clave-noble. He towered over the visitors in a bespoke rigger, an exo-skeletal frame of bronze that added a metre to his height and bulked out his limbs with its chassis. Weapon mounts, ordinarily positioned at either shoulder and below the abdominals, were absent, a concession that this was to be a peaceful engagement. Likewise, the noble's three marshals wore only ceremonial flash-sabres – no barb-whips, no rotor-threshers or other hand-held cannon. A high-marshal accompanied them, making five men in total.

The Bastionites were a people that appreciated all things martial. Perhaps that was why compliance had been so easy to achieve here, despite the world's obvious military might – they respected strength and knew its measure well. Certainly Perturabo's Legion had experienced harder-fought, longer campaigns than the one to assimilate Bastion and its annexe-worlds. They had simply recognised the power of the Space Marines and sworn fealty then and there without the expected siege. A contingent of Iron Warriors had been left behind, presumably to garrison the planet, but had left prior to the outbreak of the war with no reason given. Their primarch's influence was still felt, however, in the statues of Perturabo that rose from the cities like spires.

'Greetings from the clave,' added the noble. His russet and silver jacket was pressed and pristine, perfectly accenting the polished bronze of his exo-rigger. His boots, fastened in the machine's stirrups, were black and shining.

Vorkellen had never been to Bastion, but he had researched the world and its customs. He knew the clave represented the socio-political-martial inner circle of the world's infrastructure and that every one of Bastion's nine continents, be they ice-plain, desert flatland or mountain fastness, adhered to the will and guidance of a clave. A naturally occurring thermo-nuclear resource provided light and heat, heavily shielded and stockpiled in underground silos that ran throughout Bastion like arteries. Cullis was the capital and the prime-clave, which was why Vorkellen had travelled there for the negotiations.

'My lord brings you greeting and honours the clave,' he replied, bowing at the foot of the gangramp in the custom befitting obeisance to a clave-noble of Bastion. 'Lord Horus conveys through me his gratitude at this meeting.'

The noble nodded. 'It is received and noted by Cullis-Clave. Please follow.' He turned then, his exo-rigger whirring with servos and pistons and pneumatics, and proceeded to *clank* across the dock towards a great mechanised gate. It was magnificent on account of its size and the inner workings, displayed like a body's perfect organs on a mortician's slab. But it was ultimately artless and cold.

Vorkellen followed, his lackeys in tow. 'You've prepared our petition?' he asked Insk.

The scrivener proffered the data-slate to his master.

Vorkellen took it and proceeded to read. The guards, high-marshal and clave-noble paid them no heed, eyes front and marching to the rapidly approaching gate.

The visitors were shown into a long gallery festooned with banners and laurels.

'This is where you'll await audience with the clave-nobles,' the high-marshal said.

As he was taking in the austere surroundings, Vorkellen asked, 'Have the representatives from Terra arrived yet?'

'They are delayed.'

'Doubtless the Emperor would prefer a show of overwhelming force to bend the clave's will.'

The high-marshal scowled. 'You will get your opportunity to present your case to the clave in due course.'

'Of course, sire. I merely hope to settle this matter of allegiance quickly,' he replied contritely. *A pity we cannot unleash the World Eaters on this place and raze it*, he thought behind a strong smile that spoke of his sterling character and honourable ideals.

The high-marshal saluted – a gesture curiously similar to the old sign of Unification, a clenched fist striking the chest. 'The clave convenes in two hours and thirteen minutes.'

Horus's iterator smiled again, this time it was thinner, like an adder's lipless mouth.

Even Erebus couldn't pull this off as well as me, he thought, hubris overflowing.

'We'll be ready,' he promised.

II

The Stormbird's side hatch burst open with a well placed kick. The portal was drooling smoke as a broad, flame-limned silhouette filled it.

Arcadese was wearing his battle-helm and had the pilot's body slung over his shoulder. The human was blood-stained, his fingers and hair blackened by soot.

The angle was wrong as he reached the hatch's threshold. The Stormbird had hit nose-first, crumpling its cockpit and breaking off portions of wing. Fuselage and engine components lay scattered in the wake of their descent like entrails. A dozen fires ravaged the hull but they were burning out.

Arcadese leapt from the hatch, landing squarely a few metres from the wreck. The ground yielded underfoot and the Ultramarine sank a few centimetres. The lights and industry of Cullis were pinpricks on the horizon, no more than an hour's march away. In the distance he could see the stilts lifting the platforms and rigs above the grey-brown ash sump surrounding it. It was a petro-chemical mulch, redolent of power plant refuse and engine yard effluvia.

He set the pilot down and returned to the ship.

'Salamander,' he called into the dissipating smoke. Emergency lighting flickered.

A figure emerged from the smog, another smaller one in his arms.

'I'm here.' The artificer was cradled in Heka'tan's arms. Her eyes were red-ringed and stinging, and she coughed.

A word resolved in Arcadese's mind when he saw her: *Burden*.

'What of the others?' Heka'tan asked, stomping into the light halo from the broken hatch.

'One survivor. Outside. Where is your armour, brother?'

'Within,' said Heka'tan.

Arcadese reached for the woman. ‘Give her to me. Go retrieve your armour and our weapons. We may not be on neutral soil after all.’

Heka’tan handed the female over and headed back into the carnage of the ship.

III

An awkward silence persisted between Arcadese and the artificer.

‘How will we get back?’ she asked at last.

‘I don’t know.’

‘Were we attacked?’

‘It appears likely.’

She glanced around the industrial sump fearfully. ‘Are we safe here?’

‘I doubt it.’

‘Will we–’

‘Cease with your questions!’ The Ultramarine turned his steel gaze on her and Persephia shrank a little.

‘I’m sorry,’ she sobbed. ‘I was trained to question… when I was asked to remember.’

Arcadese looked away, his face like stone. ‘Not any more,’ he stated flatly and resumed his vigil outside the broken ship.

IV

Arcadese was relieved when Heka’tan emerged at the hatch carrying two bulky munitions crates. Each was Legion-stamped, the Eighteenth and Thirteenth respectively. He tossed them onto the ground, one after the other, and leapt out.

Heka’tan frowned when he saw Persephia. ‘Is she injured?’

‘She’s human, brother – that is all,’ Arcadese replied, busy with unlocking the crate. He smiled at the sleek, gunmetal stock, the spare clips cushioned in tight-fitting foam. Running his gauntleted hand across the bolter, he found the grip and tugged the weapon free.

‘Are you hurt?’ Heka’tan asked the artificer.

‘I’m fine,’ she snapped, whirling to face him. She wiped at her tears. ‘I’m fine. Just let me do my work.’

Arcadese was about to intercede when Heka’tan stopped him. ‘Leave her.’

The Ultramarine snorted, shucking the bolter around his shoulder on its strap. ‘There’s no threat out here, brother.’ He pointed towards Cullis. ‘Our enemies are in there.’

Heka’tan had started to pull on the mesh under-layer of his power armour. He allowed Persephia to assist with some of the rear-mounted joints and clasps. ‘These are peaceful negotiations, Arcadese.’

‘You of all people should know the falsehood of that.’

Heka’tan didn’t answer.

‘We are forgotten sons, you and I,’ Arcadese continued, ‘you by the Imperium and I by my Legion. To be revived from a coma and faced with *this*… Nikaea, Isstvan V, our beloved Warmaster a traitor – it is beyond comprehension. I should be at Calth with my father and brothers, not on this backwater world, playing diplomat.’

Heka’tan attached his greaves and chest plate in silence.

An incredulous grunt from the Ultramarine made the Salamander look up.

‘Don’t you want vengeance?’ Arcadese asked.

He was referring to Isstvan and the massacre.

‘I don’t know what I want. Duty will suffice for now.’

Arcadese approximated a shrug and went to retrieve the prone pilot.

‘Leave him.’

The Ultramarine stopped, looking to Heka’tan for clarification.

‘He’s dead.’

V

There was a jagged tear in the fuselage, fringed by incendiary burns. ‘I’ve seen a lot of downed ships. This looks like outside in rather than inside out.’

‘Indeed,’ Heka’tan replied. With Persephia’s help he was fully armoured, a forest-green monolith.

Arcadese was nearby and could barely contain his anger. ‘We were shot down.’ He wanted retribution.

Heka’tan could relate to that. ‘There’s nothing we can do about it now.’

‘What about her?’ Arcadese gestured to the artificer who stood a way back from the wreck, her head bowed.

‘She’s coming with us.’

‘She’ll slow us down.’

‘Then consider it a mercy that no one else survived.’ The rest of the small crew were all dead. ‘I’ll carry her if needs be.’

With an all human crew, the Stormbird had been retrofitted and re-appropriated as a diplomatic vessel, shedding armour and weapons for private chambers, archives and sleeping quarters. Considering the condition of the wreck, Heka’tan wondered at the wisdom of those measures now.

‘This work,’ said Arcadese at length, ‘does not honour warriors.’

‘We are warriors no longer,’ Heka’tan answered, tired of the Ultramarine’s dissatisfaction, and traced his finger down the jagged blast gouge.

Arcadese stalked off, ignoring the artificer. ‘Do what your conscience dictates, brother.’

Heka’tan was no longer listening. He dwelled on the broken Stormbird. It reminded him of another damaged vessel, on another battlefield…

...They were fleeing the landing zone, Stormbirds little more than armoured pyres with his brothers inside.

He was being dragged. Lucidity eluded him, ears ringing with the sound of the blast.

Burned into his mind, Heka’tan saw his father engulfed by fire and death. For a moment he panicked, and struggled against the two Salamanders hauling him.

‘Where is he? What happened? Why are we leaving?’

He tried to get free but he was too weak. His armour was broken and bloody.

A beaked battle-helm, the forest-green streaked with arterial crimson, looked down at him. ‘He is gone, brother.’

‘What? No!’ Heka’tan struggled again, but a jolt of pain from his injuries crippled his efforts. ‘We have to go back.’

‘There is no back. There is nothing there. Vulkan is gone.’

Railing that they had to turn around, they had to find him, Heka’tan passed out and saw only darkness.

Suddenly aware of being watched, Heka’tan came to and looked around. A landman, one of the labour-claves that worked the sump farms at the periphery of Bastion’s major cities, stood watching him. He wore a rebreather, anti-rad coat and sumper-boots. In his left hand, he carried a tilling-stave used to test the depth of sump-ash.

The landman, never before looking upon such a warrior, nodded.

Persephia had gone after Arcadese. Heka’tan nodded back, then went after them.

Negotiation

I

‘Relinquish your weapons, brother.’

Heka’tan kept his voice calm and level inside the gallery. Beyond it, through a vast stone doorway, was the auditorium where Bastion’s clave-nobles would hear their petition. As well as being sealed for the duration of the proceedings, weapons were strictly forbidden in the chamber.

It was a fact the Ultramarine didn’t take well.

‘A Legiones Astartes does not surrender his arms. Prise my weapon from my cold, dead fingers – that is the only way a warrior of Ultramar would give up his bolter, so says my Lord Guilliman.’

‘And my Lord Vulkan counsels temperance in the face of impasse. That pragmatism not pride is the solution to seemingly irreconcilable discord.’ Heka’tan unloaded his bolter clip and sprang a shell from the breech before handing it over to a sanctum-marshal. ‘Relinquish it, Arcadese. We cannot negotiate armed and armoured. Nor can we go back.’

The Stormbird was destroyed, and the march through the sump swamp had done nothing to improve Arcadese’s mood, even though Heka’tan had carried the artificer to speed their progress.

‘We will be defenceless.’

Heka’tan returned a carefully impassive expression. ‘A warrior of the Legion is never defenceless, brother.’

‘Cold, dead fingers, remember. I am an Angel of Death. I *am* death.’

Heavier-armoured marshals entered the gallery and levelled rotator-cannons at the Ultramarine.

Arcadese drew his combat blade with a belligerent shriek of steel. ‘To take arms against one is to take arms against all the Legiones Astartes!’

A stern grip on his wrist brought more anger but stopped any potential bloodshed in the making.

Heka’tan’s hold was unflinching. His red eyes blazed with captured fire. ‘Think. Any killing here won’t further our cause, it will end it… And us. Use the wisdom your father gave you.’

Though reluctant, Arcadese saw sense and relented. Scowling at the relieved marshals, he relinquished his weapons.

He was about to move forwards into the auditorium when a pair of marshals blocked his path.

Arcadese glared at them.

'Now what?'

'Your armour, too,' said the high-marshal from behind him.

The Ultramarine shook his head and gave Heka'tan a rueful look as he unclasped a gauntlet. 'This gets better.'

Persephia moved in to assist him.

'See that they are well tended,' Arcadese said in a threatening undertone. The artificer merely nodded, carefully removing a vambrace.

The high-marshal looked on. 'Who speaks for the Imperium?'

'I will,' said Arcadese. He'd removed his breastplate and pulled the torso portion of his mesh under-layer away. Grotesque bionics were revealed beneath, a legacy of Ullanor where he'd fallen in battle to the greenskin. He'd been comatose and hadn't witnessed the Emperor's last war, his greatest victory. Instead, he'd awoken to a world that no longer made any sense.

Heka'tan smiled, starting to remove his own battle-plate. 'Can't you tell he's the natural negotiator?'

II

They stood before the clave-nobles wearing borrowed robes.

'We are a sight to stir even the Sigillite to laughter,' Arcadese had remarked upon their apotheosis to diplomats.

Persephia had rejoined them later, having disappeared with the equipment to ensure it was properly stored.

Though they still wore their boots and mesh leggings, the fact of being unarmoured still rankled at the Ultramarine and he took the artificer to one side when she returned. 'I need you to do something for me…'

The rest of his request was lost to the sound of the great doors to the auditorium closing behind them.

After a loud, concussive boom, a quintet of sombre figures emerged in the sepulchral gloom. They were under-lit by a dimmed lantern array that cast haunting shadows over their faces, and seated on a dark balcony. In a gallery looking down on the auditorium floor and the petitioners was a host of shadow-veiled faces – lesser nobles of Bastion, their politicians and leaders. Judges all.

In the darkness, the vast auditorium's form was only hinted at. Heka'tan discerned more hard edges, square and functional. The air smelled of stone and steel. The chamber was much more than its name suggested. It had multiple levels, corridors and conduits. Labyrinthine, the auditorium was just a part, and a small one at that. The Salamander's gaze rested on the other petitioners.

'Hard to believe Horus sent an iterator and not a Legion.'

Arcadese looked over at the oleaginous men and women clustered around a besuited central figure. 'I thought the enemy had disbanded the remembrancers, like us.'

'Horus is a conqueror, brother. He wants his victories to become a part of history.'

'Aye,' Arcadese agreed, bile rising in his throat at the sight of the craven humans, 'he seeks immortality, and to assert his cause is righteous.'

Heka'tan muttered, 'Tell that to my cold brothers on Isstvan.'

The Ultramarine was only half-listening. His gaze went to a benighted balcony, high in the auditorium's vaults opposite the clave-nobles. 'Don't be sure the Warmaster hasn't sent warriors. Our ship didn't crash itself.'

A brazier ignited with azure flame, ending the conversation on a tense note, and illuminated the form of the high-marshal standing in the middle of the auditorium floor.

'All attend,' he boomed, his voice augmented by a vox-hailer unit attached to his mouth like breathing apparatus. 'Senate is in session.'

Arcadese scowled at the ceremony. Fighting the ork would be preferable to this. 'Take me back to Ullanor,' he grumbled.

III

Vorkellen affected a serious and professional air. Inwardly, he was ecstatic. This was *his* battlefield, a war in which even against the Legion he had the surer footing.

He eyed the Ultramarine briefly. 'I will *destroy* you,' he whispered. He needed no Legionaries. What use were they? All their strength and power would only go so far; hearts and minds could not be manipulated by brawn.

'The Emperor sends warriors to do the work of ambassadors,' Insk smirked.

'Indeed,' Vorkellen agreed, averting his gaze when he noticed the Salamander was looking at him. 'An abject failure.' He chuckled mirthlessly. To see them humbled, without arms or armour, was delicious.

The clave-nobles were addressing the assembly, explaining to all that this was a negotiation to decide the fealty of Bastion and its armies, for Horus or the Emperor. Both sides were permitted to petition for their allegiance and based on their arguments Bastion would make its choice. The losers would be granted immunity until they had returned to their starships, then they would be considered an enemy

combatant and treated as such.

As they arrived first, the representatives of Horus were permitted to speak first.

As the high-marshal retreated into the shadows, Vorkellen stepped forwards.

'Our Lord Horus is portrayed as a monster and a tyrant by some. That is not so. He is a warmaster, a warrior-general who seeks only to unify mankind under a single rule. Pledge your allegiance to Horus and become part of that unity,' he said, 'I will tell you of tyrants, of butchers and massacres most foul. On Monarchia, where the Emperor's hubris turned to madness…'

IV

High up in the vaulted auditorium echelons, far from the audience, a shadow stirred. Ready and in position, it contented itself to watch. For now.

Tyrants

I

Vorkellen thrust out an arm, 'Behold.'

A hololithic image materialised in front of him from a sub-projector in the auditorium floor. It depicted a glorious city of temples, spires and cathedra. Even in the flickering haze of the hololith's resolution it was possible to pick out statues of the Emperor, great arches of veneration carved in his image.

'Monarchia…' Vorkellen said again, leaving a pregnant pause, '…before the Legion of Roboute Guilliman levelled it.'

A second projection crackled to life, replacing the first. This was of a sundered ruin, little more than a smoking crater where civilisation had once existed. Bodies were strewn across the wreckage, those too foolish or adamant, or too afraid, to leave.

'Devastation.' Vorkellen announced it like a death knell. 'And for what reason? Why was this massacre sanctioned by the Emperor, beloved of all?' He opened his hands in a plaintive gesture. '*Love*. The people of Monarchia dared to show their love for their Master of Mankind, they dared to honour and revere him, and this was their reward – death.'

He eyed the Legionaries, his gaze studiously accusing. This was *their* fault too. They were *his* warriors, his *butchers*.

'And look,' said Vorkellen, his eyes going to the Imperial representatives, 'one of the Ultramarines warriors is with us. The Thirteenth Legion, those who consider themselves above all others, the very template that their fellow Space Marines should aspire to conform too, are the slayers of innocent women and children.'

II

Arcadese glared, observing the self-assured gait, the undercurrent of arrogance in the iterator's expression, the finery of his attire and the many expensive rejuvenat surgeries employed to preserve his youth. Vanity and confidence bled off him like an invisible fluid.

He clenched a fist. It *was* his Legion at Monarchia, though he himself had not been present.

'Stay calm, brother,' whispered Heka'tan. 'He is trying to anger you.'

Arcadese nodded. He would not rise to it. All eyes turned to the Ultramarine then, inviting his riposte.

'The citizens of Monarchia were given ample time to evacuate. We are not monsters. We–'

The iterator cut in. 'So the Thirteenth Legion did not perpetrate the destruction of Monarchia and the subsequent massacre of much of its population?'

'They were warned,' Arcadese growled. 'Monarchia practiced proscribed religion. Idolatry is the path to damnation. They would not see the light.'

'An intriguing turn of phrase,' Vorkellen bit back. 'Isn't religion the true path to enlightenment?'

'It is not a question of theological debate. This is law. Monarchia was–'

'And who laid down these edicts, these commandments that all of mankind shall adhere to upon pain of brutal sanction? Was it the Emperor?'

'You know it was.'

'And so tell me this, also. Who was it that the people of Monarchia were revering that such stern measures be taken against them? Some despot's graven image, a demagogue of a corrupt and baseless faith, or worse, perhaps a denizen of Old Night?'

'They worshipped the Emperor.'

'He who lays down his laws from on high, he who created the most formidable fighting force the galaxy has ever known through

science and gene-craft, this… *being*, who taught men how to span the great gulf of the galaxy and can kill with a thought, this is the one they honoured?'

Arcadese spoke through gritted teeth. 'Yes.'

Vorkellen snorted his impatience and turned to his audience. 'How can you trust an Emperor who punishes those that worship him, that makes hypocritical decrees? Is this the Imperium you wish to serve?'

There were mutterings from the shadows and even the five high-nobles swapped remarks and glared seriously at the Ultramarine.

'Those people were given seven days to evacuate the city. Faith is dangerous; it unlocks the road to destruction.'

'Spoken like a true fanatic,' Vorkellen replied. 'This is the reward the Emperor offers for your loyalty. He sends his Legions to murder and burn and sunder. It is the fate that awaits you should Bastion side with the Imperium.'

He paused and his voice changed. It was level, matter of fact, infused with irrefutable truth. 'Horus did not rebel against an absent father; he opposed a tyrant, masquerading as a pacifist and a benevolent ruler.'

'Lies!' Arcadese's voice echoed loudly, betraying his anger.

A shocked silence filled the auditorium.

Heka'tan shifted uneasily behind him. 'Brother…'

Arcadese unclenched his fist. The Ultramarine opened his mouth to speak but could find no words. It was heresy, wasn't it? That was why Monarchia burned. It was a lesser evil to prevent a greater one. It was…

'My apologies.'

The eyes of the entire assembly aligned on the Ultramarine, heavy with the weight of judgement.

One of the high-nobles gave their disdain a voice. 'Then prepare your next words carefully.'

Arcadese nodded stiffly, glancing daggers at the iterator. He turned and hissed at Heka'tan, 'I knew this was folly.'

'It is barely begun, brother. Have patience.' He looked around. 'Where did you send the artificer?'

'To watch over my bolter and blade. We may need them before this farce is over, if only to skewer Horus's pampered snake.'

Heka'tan was about to reply when his gaze was drawn inexplicably to the upper echelons of the chamber.

III

The shadow figure hiding on the balcony shifted slightly. The red-eyed one was looking at it. For a moment it thought it was discovered and its hand strayed towards the rifle. Then the warrior turned away and the shadow figure relaxed. Not yet… not yet…

IV

Persephia had been an excellent artisan. Before the Edict of Dissolution, she had been a sculptor – it made the transition to artificer easier. It also meant she wasn't pressed into the service of the Imperial Army or sent into the manufactorums to make shells and bombs. She heard about the conditions of those places, of the relentless overseers that made men and women into the blood-gruel of the Imperial war machine. Gone was the era of hope, of glorious conquest she'd longed to be a part of – in its place reigned an age of darkness instead.

The armoury where the Legionaries' equipment was being kept was directly below the auditorium in a sub-level. As unthreatening as she was, the guards allowed her passage into the darkened under-deeps without question. Their attention was wholly fixed on the two massive warriors addressing the clave.

The words of her master returned to her.

I need you to bring me my weapons. Smuggle them back into the auditorium – no one will pay you any attention – and put them somewhere I can easily find them.

She'd nodded, not daring to question the cobalt giant.

Our ship was attacked, you know that. There are enemies on Bastion. I believe they want to kill us and tip these negotiations in the Warmaster's favour. I would not have us exposed.

She'd headed off after that, fearful of what she might discover.

Cold, grey stone and struts of functional steel lined the corridors below the auditorium. There were anterooms and chambers, mainly stores or vast offices cluttered with slates and papers. The armoury was ahead and Persephia was still trying to work out how she would smuggle out one of the Ultramarine's massive weapons when a light prickling heat assailed her skin and nostrils. It was heady, and if she strained she could hear the droning of machinery.

She continued to her destination but found more guards outside the corridor to the armoury that hadn't been there before. She ducked into an alcove before she was seen and after a minute decided to double back. She couldn't get through that way but perhaps she could go around and find a different route in.

Another corridor led off from the main, grey artery. It was here that the machine-drone was loudest, so she followed it hoping it might bring her out on the opposite side and let her slip past the guards.

The further Persephia went, the louder the sound became. Some kind of vast machinery she could only guess at. Soon the barren walls and struts gave way to engines and pipes and conduits. There were temperature gauges and funnels, oblong chambers shielded by many-layered plascrete. A throbbing nexus of energy glowed somewhere beneath her. She had reached the end of the tunnel and found herself standing at the edge of a circular chasm ringed by gantries.

Bizarrely, the way was open. None of the gates this far down were locked and there were no further guards she could see. Intermittently, she came across slumped gun-drones but the cyb-organics were deactivated.

Labour servitors moved back and forth, though, engrossed in menial tasks. Persephia moved around them gingerly, careful not to interrupt their routines or touch them, as she descended. The heat was increasing. Patches of sweat darkened her underarms and a veneer of perspiration circled her brow.

She saw a servitor at work by one of the consoles. A bank of screens displayed some of the other geothermal nuclear sites on Bastion. They all looked disturbingly alike. Persephia moved on, drawn by curiosity and the distant nuclear glow coming closer.

Someone was moving below her. Not a servitor – its movements were not syncopated enough. Too large as well, and much bigger than one of the cyb-organic drones. It worked at one of the consoles, attaching something. Persephia was too far away to see what it was. Something about the figure made her pause. She felt disquieted as she watched its bulk shifting subtly in its work.

She suddenly realised why there were no active guards, why the route to the nuclear core was open. Persephia wondered how far up the auditorium level now was and how far away. She'd lost track of time.

There was danger here. Her instincts screamed it. To let the figure see her was to invite that trouble to her. It was to invite death.

A bead of sweat ran down Persephia's brow and into her eye. She gasped.

The figure looked up, hard eyes glaring through crimson lenses. It was grey; grey like the walls. The figure's armour was fringed in a dirty gold and a skull icon emblazoned its left shoulder guard like an omen. It saw the woman and crouched.

It took Persephia a few seconds to realise what was happening. Boosting from a squat position, the figure had climbed the gantry immediately above. Then it repeated the motion and did the same again. Underfoot, the metal shook her.

She ran.

Another tremor rippled through the gantry, stronger this time, perhaps only a few levels down. Clanking footfalls followed, resonating behind her, and Persephia realised the figure was now pursuing directly. She heard the hard *chank* of metal slamming against metal and ducked behind a servitor. A second later there was an almighty boom and the menial exploded in a shower of bone and machine-parts.

Persephia picked up the pace. Her ears were still ringing. Death was behind her. It wore a face of iron and she couldn't outrun it.

A hard engine growl assaulted her ears, as the sheer size of the Iron Warrior engulfed her.

The engine growl became a wet churn and then a scream as Persephia let out her death cry. She spat a torrent of blood over her clothes and then her slayer before her eyes became glassy and still.

Enemies Among Us

I

Heka'tan was listening to more of the iterator's diatribes against the Imperium and the Emperor, watching Arcadese slowly losing his cool. His mood was agitated too, but for a different reason.

'She's been gone too long.'

Arcadese half-turned as he heard the Salamander begin to move. 'Where are you going?'

'To find her.'

'What?' he hissed, only half hearing the iterator's continued verbal assaults. 'I need you to speak of Isstvan V. As a witness, your testimony is crucial.'

'I have to find her, Arcadese.'

The Ultramarine's face creased with confusion. 'Why?' He grimaced. Arcadese's injuries had not fully healed; they would never fully heal. His bionics gave him motion but at a cost in pain. No human could bear it. For a Legionary such as the Ultramarine it left him debilitated. Even had he awoken from his sus-an membrane coma in time for the muster to Calth, Arcadese would not have gone. He was no longer a front-line trooper. Denial raged in his words and his manner but his eyes couldn't hide it. Heka'tan saw it as easily as he did his own failings.

'We were charged with her protection, brother. We swore an oath, both of us, in case you don't remember. An oath of moment. I'm assuming that still means something to you.'

Arcadese straightened suddenly and for a moment Heka'tan thought he might strike him. Then he relaxed, bionics cycling down to a low hum from their agitated squeal.

'I'm not sure what anything means, any more,' he conceded in a low voice, not referring to his honour parchments. 'I remember,' he added, louder, 'but this is our duty too.'

'I just want to know she is safe.'

Arcadese sighed, resigned. ‘Do what you must, but when Bastion swears for Horus and we are ejected unceremoniously from its atmosphere, do not lay the blame squarely on my shoulders, brother.’ The Ultramarine’s face and demeanour changed abruptly. ‘What’s wrong with your hand?’

It was shaking, so slightly Heka’tan hadn’t realised.

‘Nerve tremor,’ he lied, ‘probably from the crash. Soon as I find the artificer, I’ll return.’

There was no time for a reply. All eyes were on Arcadese again as he took his turn to try and sway the clave. ‘I need battle, not debate,’ he muttered, totally unaware that he was about to get his wish.

II

A blighted plain of ruined cities and virus-scoured landmarks scrolled before the clave-nobles in grainy panoramic. The recording had sound as well as image but was eerily quiet.

‘What do you hear?’ Arcadese asked, leaving a long pause to emphasise his point. ‘It is the sound of death. It is Isstvan III, where Horus Lupercal committed genocide and set in motion a galactic war. An entire planet destroyed by viral weaponry. Fratricide amongst the Legiones Astartes themselves, conducted on a massive scale. Only by the efforts of Captain Garro of the Death Guard, escaping on the frigate *Eisenstein*, is anyone alive to tell of this atrocity. No fair warning, no order to stand down. Just death.’

Arcadese signalled for the image to be shut off. He pressed his palms together. ‘These are the deeds of a dictator, one who has turned from the Emperor’s light and embraced darkness.’

The Ultramarine scowled. ‘Isstvan III was a ploy to draw out those still loyal to the Emperor and cull them in one blow. Ally with Horus, and you join forces with a madman.’

Vorkellen spoke up quickly. ‘Isstvan III was a planet in open revolt. Its lord commander was a psyker-mutant called Vardus Praal that had declared against the Imperium. It was on the orders of the Council of Terra itself that the Sons of Horus and their brother Legions were sent there.’

‘What is your point, iterator?’ asked the head high-noble.

‘That Horus was ordered to the Isstvan system by the agents of the Emperor’s will and yet it is claimed this was somehow part of the Warmaster’s plan to rid himself of internecine traitors? He was sent there,’ his gaze went to the Ultramarine, ‘*Sent. There*. By Terra.’

Arcadese clenched his fists. ‘He slew billions, bombarded the surface and then unleashed his mad dog upon those warriors still loyal to the Emperor.’

‘A world in the thrall of a dangerous defector from Imperial Law, a psyker-mutant no less – a creature with the ability to affect the minds of men,’ the iterator continued. ‘We were not at Isstvan III – your fighting days were done at Ullanor, were they not?’

Arcadese didn’t answer. His teeth were clenched and he glowered.

Vorkellen went on. ‘I have testimony that a vein of disaffection ran through the Imperial forces, and that the Emperor sought to rein in the Warmaster’s pre-eminence. Certainly, his cult of personality was growing ever since the Emperor abandoned the Great Crusade. Can gods be jealous?’

‘This is idiotic,’ Arcadese pleaded to the clave. ‘These are facile notions designed to muddy the truth – that Horus committed genocide and staged a pre-emptive strike against warriors in his Legion and the Legions of his traitorous brothers that were still loyal to the Emperor.’

‘Horus only acted when forced,’ Vorkellen replied, ‘when he realised factions within his own ranks, warriors sworn loyal to him, were gathering against him, he did the only thing he could. He stopped them.’

‘And in so doing, slew thousands,’ replied Arcadese, ‘scribes, poets, imagists and iterators from the Remembrancer Order into the bargain. He is a monster.’

III

The word was hard to use.

Monster.

Horus was still a father figure of sorts to this Legionary, Vorkellen saw it described in the anguish on the Ultramarine’s face.

He is still struggling to understand, he thought. *The Emperor was a fool to send warriors such as these. They are broken soldiers, gratefully forgotten by their Legions. He has doubts, and if he has doubts… well…*

‘It was your beloved master who put these men and women in danger. Sent to document the Great Crusade, to cement forever in living memory the deeds of the Emperor and his primarchs. Their deaths were a tragedy, but war, a war brought about by an absent father who failed to attend to his sons, has many casualties. It hardly makes the Warmaster a monster.’

As the Ultramarine’s face screwed up into a snarl, Vorkellen allowed himself a tiny smile. *Go on then, now is the time – seal my victory*.

‘What has been promised you, eh, Vorkellen is it?’ The Ultramarine couldn’t keep the venomous sneer from his lips.

‘I am merely a humble servant, here to see that my master is fairly represented.’

‘Do you honour a pact with some fell power, a concubine perhaps?’

Vorkellen’s eyes were icy. ‘You would like to crush me, wouldn’t you?’

Arcadese nodded slowly, drawing an objection from the clave that Vorkellen waved down.

‘The Emperor sends warriors when he really needs ambassadors, those who won’t *embarrass* themselves in unfamiliar surroundings where a bolter and blade is of no import.’

‘I don’t need my weapons to break you!’ Arcadese was raging again and stepped towards the iterator.

And there it is. Vorkellen smiled, just for the Ultramarine. *You cannot fight nature*.

A squad of marshals wielding flash-sabres moved in to intercept him.

IV

Arcadese knew he could crush them without his weapons, do it so quick and clean he’d be at Vorkellen’s throat before the emergency command be given and the chamber flooded with armed men.

Instead, he put up his hand.

The guards backed off.

Arcadese sagged, feeling the tendrils of defeat tighten around his heart.

Heka’tan, *where are you?*

Bodies

I

The levels below the auditorium were vast and labyrinthine. It would take an army of men weeks to find an individual in its depths if it didn’t want to be found. Heka’tan was but one man, and he had a few hours at most.

At least the shaking had ceased. When he’d forced the guard to let him go below and the dark had enveloped him, he’d leant against the wall and closed his eyes. Images of the dropsite massacre had sprung unbidden into his mind. He remembered his last sight of Vulkan, the primarch engulfed in bright magnesium light.

Dead? No one knew. It was a mystery that haunted the Legion. Ferrus Manus was dead. A terrible fate for any Legion to lose their father, but at least the Iron Hands had closure, at least they *knew*. In many ways, for the Salamanders, it was worse. And what now for them? A bit part in a galactic war where the fate of humanity and Terra was the prize and cost.

Heka’tan put the thoughts from his mind and started to search.

He found Persephia’s body after thirty minutes.

She lay discarded like refuse in one of the archive chambers, her innards pooled in her lap like glossy red ribbons. The artificer’s face was locked in a horror-grimace, flecked by her own dried blood.

She hadn’t died here. There were drag marks on the floor, hastily concealed. Heka’tan held out his hand and detected a tiny prickling sensation on his fingertips. Heat. It was bleeding upwards from below.

Heka’tan looked back to the corpse. The wound in Persephia’s chest was familiar to him. He knew what had caused it. She had been eviscerated by a chainsword. It was a Legion weapon. Arcadese was right, Horus *had* sent warriors.

The Salamander followed the source of the heat.

II

The shadow shifted on the balcony. It caressed the rifle in its hands now. The red-eyed one was missing, and it didn’t like that. Made it feel vulnerable, potentially exposed when there was a Legionary unaccounted for. The work below was supposed to be finished, now the second phase began. There were four marshals below, watching the stairways into the lower chambers. Another four stood nearby in the dark. No guns here. No weapons of any sort. How foolish they were. How arrogant.

The high-marshal was alone and pensive as the proceedings went on. He was blind, just like the clave-nobles and the other onlookers were blind. They would see. Everyone would see. But then it would be too late. Then there was the iterator and his cronies, and the other warrior; the broken one, the half-Space Marine. Little did he realise it wasn’t just his body that had been ripped by the greenskin.

It was nearly time. The shadow shifted on the balcony, bringing the rifle sight up to its eye. The target sat snugly in its crosshairs. A

second and it would be over. Just one second, the time it takes to squeeze a trigger. Soon.

III

They were losing. *He* was losing. Not a bolt fired, nor a blade drawn and still Arcadese knew the battle was being lost, metre by agonising metre. For a warrior, it was a strange sensation, not how he had pictured his service to his Legion.

The human iterator, despite his outward frailties, had a formidable intelligence; in a fit of pique, Arcadese thought he'd been mind-augmented or hypno-conditioned.

Dagonet was a disaster. Vorkellen painted Horus as victim and the Imperium as dishonourable murderers. A fortunate twist of fate had allowed the Warmaster to escape a heinous assassination attempt; whilst leaving one of his captains and a vaunted Legionary, Luc Sedirae, slain in cold blood. The massacre that followed was retaliatory, an effort to find and execute the perpetrators. Collateral damage was inevitable. The Emperor's hand had caused this, or the agents acting in his stead.

Prospero was no better. Wolves unleashed on a cultured world and a son that desired only to please his father. The subsequent razing of the Planet of the Sorcerers was made to show the Emperor's inability to forgive or grant mercy. Was Magnus *really* such a threat? Leman Russ and his Legion made sure that question could never be answered.

None of it added strength to Arcadese's cause, and he felt the allegiance of Bastion slipping from his grasp. He had only one argument left, but the one to give it was nowhere to be found.

IV

Unarmed and wearing robes, Heka'tan knew he was at a distinct disadvantage against another warrior of the Legiones Astartes.

He could have gone back, raised the alarm, but then Persephia's murderer might have already escaped and they would never know what was really going on here. He told himself this was the reason but the truth of it was his rage for Isstvan V had been impotent for too long; he needed to vent it.

It didn't take long to follow the murderer's trail. It led Heka'tan to a steel gantry looking down on Bastion's nuclear core. He recognised the figure still toiling in its depths. Memories of fighting a desperate last stand in the Urgall Depression came back to him.

'Iron Warrior!'

The grey-metal Legionary turned, his helmet lenses glinting coldly in the reflected nuclear light.

He scoffed, a harsh and tinny sound that emanated from his vox-grille. 'Aren't your kind all dead?'

Heka'tan roared and threw himself over the gantry. He collided with the Iron Warrior – hitting the ceramite like it was a fortress wall. He didn't have time to evade the plunging Salamander. He'd only half-drawn his chainblade when Heka'tan knocked it buzzing from his grasp and onto the lower gantry floor.

Instantly the two Legionaries became locked in a fearsome embrace. But with his power armoured battle-plate, the Iron Warrior was stronger.

'What gave me away?' he growled, forcing Heka'tan to his knees, the fingers of both combatants laced together in a wrestler's grappling hold. 'It was the human, wasn't it? So like your benevolent, dead Vulkan to come looking for an innocent.'

A surge of anger leant Heka'tan strength. He pushed with his legs, using sheer brute force to draw level and stand face-to-face with the Iron Warrior.

'Don't sully his name with your tongue, betrayer,' he spat.

The Iron Warrior seized Heka'tan's fingers in his gauntleted grip, causing the Salamander to cry out as he flung him across the gantry and down to the level below.

Pain blurred Heka'tan's vision but he saw his enemy coming to finish him well enough. He reached over and his shattered fingers found what they sought.

The Iron Warrior raised a massive fist, intent on beating his former brother to death, when he found the buzzing teeth of his own chainsword lodged in his gut. He had charged right onto it.

Heka'tan held onto the hilt as long as he could before struggling to his feet and barging into the flailing, bleeding Iron Warrior. The two of them broke the gantry rail and plunged over the edge.

Heat radiation coming off the nuclear core warmed Heka'tan's skin. He was hanging one-handed off the twisted railing several levels down, the Iron Warrior doing the same a few metres away. His armour was blistering, the black and yellow painted chevrons flaking away.

'This changes nothing, Salamander. Vulkan is dead,' he laughed. 'You're all dead.' He reached for his bolt pistol sat snug in his side holster and made the railing squeal. He was too heavy for it to hold. The metal broke away and the Iron Warrior fell. Heka'tan watched him carom off another gantry, then a piece of piping, before bouncing off into the nuclear core itself. There was a brief flash of azure fire and the Legionary disappeared, burned to ash.

With some effort, Heka'tan dragged his body back up onto the gantry. He tried not to think about the Iron Warrior's last words, what he'd said about his father. It wasn't true. He was merely being goaded.

The enemy had dropped something when they'd fought. It was a data-bundle of some kind, taken from one of the subterranean terminals. It was smashed up but the last piece of data was still on the recorder: war machine schematics, vast and terrible engines the

likes of which Heka'tan had never seen. They'd been kept here in secret and now the saboteur was erasing their existence. Coming to Bastion had never been about winning allegiance. Limping, he went to the terminal screen. It displayed all the other nuclear hubs around the planet, but he didn't know why.

With time running out and still weaponless, Heka'tan hurried back to the auditorium.

V

Arcadese had done his best, but the time for talking was over.

The clave had heard the petitions of both parties, had deliberated and were about to give their answer.

On the balcony above, the high-noble came forwards into the light. His expression was unreadable.

'We of Bastion are a proud people. None the less we joined the nascent Imperium on the promise of unity and prosperity. I would prefer independence but since that would see us consigned to atoms by Legion starships, I have little choice.' The high-noble seemed reluctant to continue. 'We honour our original oaths, Bastion will pledge for Hor–'

'Arcadese!' The warning brought all eyes to the Salamander and came three seconds before the rifle shot. The Ultramarine had enough time to discern the grainy red light from the laser sight, to catch the opening bloom of the muzzle flash as it flared wide and put his body between the assassin and its target.

Iterator Vorkellen screamed as the Legionary bore down on him, believing at first that the Ultramarine had finally cracked. The marshals were too slow to intervene, just as surprised as the iterator.

The bullet forced a grimace as it grazed Arcadese's shoulder. He was trying to twist mid-air so he didn't crush Vorkellen's bones to paste when they landed. The second shot, taking a marshal in the neck and killing him instantly, gave the others pause. Only when the third went down, right eye ventilated, did they all look to the other balcony.

VI

He was crouched, nose of the rifle just peeking over the balcony edge, when Heka'tan found him.

The Salamander made the assessment of his enemy quickly, as he was reaching the top of the stairs and advancing.

Human, wearing nondescript clothes. He recalled the landman from earlier and knew this was the same individual. He also saw a sanctum-marshal's garb in a bundle nearby to the shooter's position. The rifle was custom – it looked almost ceramic. That's how he'd avoided detection. Nine marshals entered; now, only eight took up their positions. It was so dark, slipping away would've been easy.

'You overextend yourself,' said the Salamander, slowing to a walk, filling the balcony walkway with his onyx-black bulk. 'I saw your rifle tip from below. I saw it earlier too, I think. You were the one that shot down our ship.'

The landman stood and nodded. Evidently, the rifle was spent. He'd discarded it and drew a long blade from his side instead – *literally* from his side. Heka'tan's eyes widened when he saw it *snuck* out of the assassin's flesh.

'You should've hit the fuel tanks and not the wing,' the Salamander went on, creeping closer, allowing Arcadese time to catch up and support him. It looked like a man before him, but the Space Marine's instincts told him otherwise. This was something else. 'Your aim was off if you were planning on killing everyone on board.'

'Was it?' The assassin flashed a smile and his eyes changed colour, even the hue of his skin seemed to shift.

Heka'tan lunged just as the blade was flung at him. He dodged, reacting to the sudden move, but cried out as it shaved his skin. He missed the assassin by a hand span, grasping air as he leapt off the balcony and to the floor below.

VII

Arcadese swung at the assassin's leaping form with a flash-sabre from one of the dead guards but missed. He about-faced but couldn't stop two more marshals dying to the assassin's finger-blades. A third fell to what looked like a barbed tongue, lashing from the man's mouth.

The Ultramarine gave chase, but his bionics slowed him down. The assassin had reached the shadows and led into the corridors beyond. Even on the upper level, the auditorium space was a honeycomb of passageways and conduits.

Heka'tan was right behind him.

'You're bleeding,' he remarked, noting the bullet graze along the Ultramarine's shoulder.

'So are you.'

Heka'tan dabbed at his flank with a finger and felt the blade wound. 'Then we owe him two cuts, one each,' he promised and followed the assassin into the darkness. Behind them, the remaining marshals were trying not to panic. They'd also foregone pursuit to secure the clave-nobles. The high-marshal was vociferous above the clamour, bellowing frantic orders.

Vorkellen was screeching at his lackeys, in obvious pain. It drew a smile to Arcadese's lips, smothered by the shadows that engulfed

him.

With the darkness the sound died away and the Legionaries slowed.

Heka'tan hissed, 'You were right, brother.'

'What do you mean?' asked Arcadese, staying as low as he could and watching the deeper shadows.

'I found another of Horus's emissaries below, an Iron Warrior.'

That piqued the Ultramarine's interest.

'I killed him but he was doing something below, something that the garrison here has been working on. He was monitoring the nuclear hubs too. I don't know why. Answers may come from our assassin. Either way, word must reach the rest of the Imperium.'

'And we are sealed in,' Arcadese remarked ruefully.

Heka'tan's eyes blazed belligerently.

'But so is he.'

Hunters

I

The attack was swift. The red-eyed one was easy to spot; the broken one it could hear fifty metres away. They were not stealthy targets, either of them.

A shallow cry of pain felt satisfying as it plunged a blade into red-eyes's shoulder. A heavy punch into the broken one's ribs made an audible crack. So much for the dense bone-plate – the surgeries must have weakened it.

It dodged a reply, then a second. Rolling up to its full height, it disengaged the holofield trapping it in the landman's form.

II

Arcadese swung wildly, but met only air with his borrowed flash-sabre. Next to him, Heka'tan grunted and he assumed the Salamander had failed to make contact too.

The assassin was fast – faster than them. Faster than him. Not for the first time, he cursed at his bionics.

He was rolling and Arcadese was turning, Heka'tan too. What met them both as the darkness parted before the flash-sabre's magnesium flare was not what the Ultramarine expected.

He was not a man at all, at least not one that adhered to the normal conventions of size. He was massive, taller than either Arcadese or Heka'tan, and he was fierce. Tattoos around the attacker's neck described a long chain of words, a name, or several fractions of a name, recounted on his body, disappearing beneath a loose-fitting bodyglove of red leather. The armour looked gladiatorial. There was something Terran about it. When Arcadese saw the marking on the warrior's fist as he swung the spatha around in a lazy rotational arc, he knew.

'Custodian.'

III

When the blade flashed in, the Ultramarine parried quickly. He was already backing away. Heka'tan was trying to circle. He'd made the connection too, realising the landman was merely a projection, courtesy of a holofield.

The Salamander tried to shoulder barge the warrior, distract him and bring him into his battle-brother's arc, but he weaved aside, slamming his elbow down on Heka'tan's spine. Then he went down, snapping a blade-kick into Arcadese's gut that sent him sprawling.

When both Legiones Astartes had got up, the assassin was gone, absorbed into the darkness.

Arcadese retrieved his flash-sabre and went to give chase. Heka'tan seized his shoulder, stopping him.

'No, that's what he wants. Wait. Think.'

The Ultramarine nodded. 'You're right.' His mind was reeling – a Custodian, here on Bastion, trying to kill Horus's iterator. What was this – Plan B? 'Should we even fight him? Could we? I'm surprised we lived as long as we did.'

Heka'tan only glowered at the dark. 'We need to dig in and wait it out.'

'He will pick us off, one by one. We cannot wait.' He glanced back askance at the Salamander. 'We could always just give him what he wants.'

'No, something isn't right.'

'Then what do you suggest? The Custodians are loyal only to the Emperor. They are his lions, Salamander. They do not question, they

merely *do*. If we are between him and his prey–'

'That's not a Custodian,' Heka'tan interjected. 'It is similar, but its movements are copied, its form a facsimile, a simulacrum.'

Arcadese hissed, retreating into the light with his brother. 'How can you be sure?'

Their eyes met. Heka'tan's flared with an angry glow.

'Because if it was real, we'd already be dead.'

IV

There was panic in the auditorium. The shot and subsequent commotion had lit a spark of fear in the assembly that was growing from a flame into a conflagration. Streams of politicians and senators were rushing from their seats to pound on the doors to the auditorium. Some screamed, others sobbed, a few merely stayed seated and stared.

By now the clave-nobles had been evacuated from the balcony and were on the main auditorium floor, surrounded by their bodyguards with the rest of the trapped civilians.

Other soldiers were scanning the upper echelons and alcoves for further assassins. They would find none.

Amongst the visitors, Vorkellen was profoundly unhappy and addressed the already stressed high-marshal who was trying to restore order. 'What are you doing to get us out of here?'

Insk was nearby, muttering soothing words to his master and requesting relaxants from another aide. Vorkellen waved them away with bitter tirades.

V

Arcadese was in unsympathetic mood and replied in the high-marshal's stead. 'We are trapped, you idiot. There's nothing he can do.'

The iterator looked about to respond but bit back his tongue when the Ultramarine glowered. Arcadese let him be, and approached Heka'tan. Frantic as they were, the people kept away from the two Legionaries.

The Salamander leant in close, talking softly so that no one else could hear him.

'Whatever that thing is, it will come for us.'

'I know.' Arcadese had his eye on the humans. They'd started to huddle around the sealed door and were spilling out into the centre of the chamber. 'Their fear disgusts me. I thought this was meant to be a war-like world.'

'They are not soldiers, not all of them, and they've never been trapped in a room with something like this before,' Heka'tan paused, feeling sympathy for the panicked mob. 'We have to hunt it down.'

Arcadese nodded.

Heka'tan went on, 'You were right. We cannot wait. We waited at Isstvan.' His eyes went off to a dark place, one from memory. 'We waited and died.' His hand was shaking again. He clenched it with his other hand to steady it.

Arcadese lowered his voice. 'I'm sorry that you're still affected by it, brother. I cannot imagine the pain.'

'The legacy isn't mine to bear. It's for those who follow, for whatever happens next.'

Regarding the dead marshals, left where they'd fallen, Arcadese changed subject. 'This matter was always going to be decided by blood. These entire proceedings were a farce. Unless we find that assassin, the Imperium will be accused of treachery. No one will negotiate with us.'

Heka'tan was shaking his head slowly. 'Perhaps? But I feel there is something else going on here, something from back when the Iron Warriors had a garrison on this world.'

'Then we must expose the truth, whatever that might be. Our best chance is tracking the iterator's would-be killer.'

'I cannot help think it merely shrouds an even greater atrocity.' Heka'tan gestured to the crowd. Some of the fervour had died down now. There was moaning and grim-faced acceptance. 'And there are the humans to consider.'

Arcadese looked nonplussed. 'What about them?'

'If we're outmanoeuvred the assassin would make a red mess of them.'

'They'll have to look to their own defence.'

'One of us should stay.'

'We need both of us to kill this thing. Since when did the sons of Vulkan not present a united front?'

'We're pragmatists too, brother, and know when to adapt,' said Heka'tan. 'We cannot wait around to be murdered where we stand. So, I'll go.'

'You?' Arcadese's displeasure was obvious. 'If you want to protect the humans so badly then stay behind and do just that.' A few of the civilians had turned as the volume of the conversation rose.

'I wish I could, but only one of us can hunt. You are not able.'

The Ultramarine's tone darkened. 'What's that supposed to mean?'

'Look at you,' offered Heka'tan with traditional Salamander bluntness. He hadn't meant to be insulting, he just didn't appreciate his

words and manner could be construed that way.

'I am a warrior still,' Arcadese asserted, 'as strong and capable as any uncouth barbarian from a tribal culture.'

'Prove it then.'

'What?'

'Attack me, see if you can humble–'

Arcadese launched himself at Heka'tan, flash-sabre blazing. He was slow though, just a second or two, but enough of a lag for the Salamander to avoid the blow and head-butt the Ultramarine fiercely across the bridge of his patrician nose.

Blood gushed, streaking Arcadese's lips, before Heka'tan used the Ultramarine's bulk against him and sent him sprawling across the auditorium floor. A few of the nobles had to scurry out of the way. There were fearful gasps as their protectors turned on one another.

Arcadese was up as swiftly as his bionics allowed but found his flash-sabre taken and levelled at his neck.

'I will hunt,' Heka'tan told him. 'You stay.'

Breathing hard, the Ultramarine nodded slowly. 'I won't forget this, son of Vulkan.'

'I know you won't.' Heka'tan jogged off into the darkness, flash-sabre in hand.

VI

The Salamander returned less than an hour later.

Arcadese had his back to him. The Ultramarine's demeanour hadn't improved.

'Have you given up already? I thought Salamanders were supposed to be tenacious.'

'I found a spoor and followed it into the deeper conduits,' Heka'tan replied. Arcadese noticed he was holding the flash-sabre in the opposite hand. 'It seems the assassin had an escape route planned from the beginning.'

'So, he's gone?'

Heka'tan nodded, 'Through a way we can't follow. It's too narrow, too steep, and goes right to the bowels of the complex, to the geothermal sub-levels.'

'We wait then,' said Arcadese, turning his back on Heka'tan, 'for the gates to open and our failure to be known to our Legions. Horus has won this world, brother.'

'It is worse than that,' said Heka'tan, in a voice that sounded only partially like his own.

Rather than being shocked, Arcadese dropped his shoulder for the attack he knew was coming. He turned, bringing up another flash-sabre, parrying Heka'tan's bone-blade that had rapidly morphed from his fingertips.

'How did you know?' asked the assassin.

Their blades were locked, spitting sparks and bone chips.

'The smell,' Arcadese told his attacker. He smiled as a thunderous bulk rammed into the assassin, crumpling his flank.

'I reek of ash and heat,' said the real Heka'tan, having exploded from the shadows where he'd been lurking since his initial departure. 'Your wound obviously wasn't quite deep enough.'

They wrestled, Salamander and assassin, the latter transforming even as they moved.

A metamorphic catalogue of identities blended and re-blended across the alien's face, first the landman, then the subtle facial shift to the marshal, finally the Custodian upon which it settled.

'You are no lion,' snarled Heka'tan, snapping a vertebra in the creature's spine.

Around them, the crowd shrieked and shouted in terror. The throng pressing up against the door became a crush.

The assassin mewled in pain, a tonal, bird-like resonance that set the Salamander's teeth on edge.

'Clever,' it hissed through clenched teeth, bringing its knees up sharply into Heka'tan's sternum and vaulting him off its body.

The Salamander landed in a wide sprawl, a few metres away.

'A lie to snare a liar.' Arcadese came crashing in, two-handed, with the flash-sabre. A ball of light blazed and faded at once as the weapon connected with stone not flesh.

The assassin bounded backwards, weaving to avoid the Salamander's heavy cross as it came within range.

The bone-blade became a Custodian's training spatha in its right hand and it slashed at Arcadese.

Faux-steel screeched against true-steel as the Ultramarine took the blow on his bionic arm. It was only his forearm that was augmetic but it provided an effective foil. He stomped, aiming for the assassin's foot to cripple it. Rockcrete splintered beneath him, the ground webbing outwards in tiny fault lines.

'Yield, you are undone,' snapped Arcadese.

Heka'tan loomed in snatches of the Ultramarine's vision, just behind the assassin.

He flung his arms out and snapped them together like mechanical foundry tongs, seizing the assassin in an onyx-black grip.

'You are the ones who are undone,' the creature cackled, spitting a gobbet of intestinal acid that seared Heka'tan's cheek. The Salamander didn't even flinch, he merely squeezed.

Arcadese caved in the creature's face with a bionic fist, the bone-blade ripped from the assassin's grasp but still lodged in his forearm.

It wheezed like a perforated lung as Heka'tan slowly crushed it. The integrity of the creature's mimicry was breaking down with the onset of its death. Personas strange and familiar raced across its form and countenance like the changing of the seasons.

'What was your purpose here?' Heka'tan growled, bearing the lacrymole down, for it could be no other xenos abomination. 'What greater evil are you masking?'

Vampiric shapeshifters, the Emperor and his Legions had taken great pains to ensure the annihilation of the lacrymole and yet, like the Terran atom-roach, they refused to become extinct.

Even its true form was nebulous, a conglomeration of wrongly shaped limbs and distended flesh-parts. Its eyes were discernable, however – pitiless black pinpricks of endless hate.

It died laughing, a hot, wet sound more choke than mirth.

'What I cannot fathom,' uttered Heka'tan when it was done and the broken sack of muscle and bone shards slid from his forge-smith's grasp, 'is how it could emulate a Custodian?'

Arcadese mashed the lacrymole's quivering cranium with his boot. The bionic force he applied was enough to pulp it. The lacrymole needed to *taste* their prey, absorb them, before they could copy them biologically. To emulate one almost perfectly, it meant this alien had somehow bested and consumed the biological matter of one of the Emperor's lions. Such a thing didn't seem possible.

The Ultramarine shook his head. 'What did it mean, "You are the ones that are undone"?'

Planetkill

I

The answer came with the thunderous boom that shook the flagstones of the auditorium floor. The explosion emanated from far beneath them, in the lowest levels at Cullis's nuclear hub.

Subdued by the death of the assassin and the relief that brought, the trapped Bastionites started to panic anew and hammered at the door again.

Another explosion rocked the chamber and a crack formed underfoot. A clutch of senators disappeared into the darkness and in the plume of fire that spewed up after them.

One of the clave-nobles had broken free of his bodyguards and was tugging at Arcadese's robes. 'Save us... please.'

The Ultramarine looked down on the man with disdain.

Heka'tan interrupted his response. 'We have been doubly deceived, brother.'

A twitch below Arcadese's right eye betrayed the pain of the injuries the Ultramarine had sustained in the fight with the lacrymole assassin. He was angry at being duped. 'A saboteur?'

'Willing to destroy an entire planet to keep its secrets,' said Heka'tan. Another tremor shook the chamber. A column split from its dais and crushed more of the civilians. There would be no hope of restoring order now.

'Then these minor explosions are merely a preamble to something much bigger.' The clave-noble was still scrabbling at the Ultramarine's garb. He pushed the human away. 'Begone! By holding court with Horus you have doomed yourself and your world.'

'Perhaps not...' Heka'tan was looking past the frightened crowd to the door. The broken masonry had fallen against it. The column had been heavy enough to put a wide crack in the door's surface.

Some of the trapped civilians were even now pulling at it.

'Stand aside,' Arcadese bellowed, 'in the name of the Legiones Astartes!'

The frightened throng parted for the two warriors who reached the door and each taking a side of the fissure, which was deep enough to get their fingers in, pulled. The stone door came away in chunks now that its structural integrity had been compromised. The crack widened.

Bullied to the front by his entourage, Vorkellen was right behind the Legionaries.

'Get us out,' he pleaded in a small voice, clinging to Heka'tan's arm. 'I too have been deceived.'

The Salamander looked down at him like he was the intestinal remains of an enemy he'd just gutted. 'Where is your ship?' he demanded, before the majority of the auditorium floor collapsed into a fiery chasm. Most of the senators went with it. Only those clustered next to the exit were spared death by fire.

'Close, at the end of the gangway just outside,' said the iterator. All of his suave self-assurance was evaporating before the prospect of his imminent demise.

Debris was falling from the ceiling, killing Bastionites by the score.

The gap in the door was wide enough for the Legionaries to squeeze out, which meant it was also large enough for the humans too. There were precious few left, just the clave-nobles and a handful of senators and marshals, and the iterator with his cronies of course.

Arcadese was first out and began waving the others on. Heka'tan was last through just as an almighty conflagration swept across the sundered auditorium. Smudged silhouettes in the smoke cloud screamed for rescue but the Salamander closed his senses to them.

'They're good as dead,' he said as he met the hard gaze of the Ultramarine. It wasn't an easy choice to make.

II

Then they were running, even as Cullis was collapsing around them. Portions of the city were giving way under the chain of incendiaries planted by the Iron Warrior. Out in the slums, great cracks were opening up in the ground, pulling in vast tracts of sump-ash. Distant landmen drove their hauler-trucks in crazy arcs to avoid the growing fissures. On the horizon behind them, the super-rigs and megaliths of other Bastion cities burned.

Out on the landing platform the air hazed. Ash and flesh-smoke baked on the hot breeze. Girders and gantries groaned in protest as they buckled and fell in the expanding conflagration below.

They were fleeing across the exit strip that led to the deck where Vorkellen's ship was still anchored when a fuel hopper burst and sent a plume of fire and force into the air.

Several of the civilians were thrown off the narrow companionway and plummeted screaming.

Leading, Arcadese, turned to see another group crushed by a collapsed comms tower. They died without uttering a sound.

Heka'tan was missing. Just a few more metres to the ship and he'd lost the Salamander. Vorkellen, too, was nowhere to be seen. Smoke and fire dirtied the view.

The Ultramarine waved the few survivors on. 'Into the ship.' He seized one of the iterator's cronies by the arm as he hurried past. The scrivener had a cut to his forehead and looked dazed. 'Wait for us,' Arcadese told him. After the scrivener had nodded feebly, the Ultramarine let him go and went back into the smoke cloud.

'Heka'tan!' The pall was thick, getting thicker. Arcadese wished he still had his battle-helm; the task of finding his battle-brother was made more difficult without it.

Below the belt of charcoal-grey, the Ultramarine saw four grasping fingers. They were black, like onyx.

Arcadese cried, 'Hold on!' and rushed to the ragged lip of the companionway. He thrust his hand down but Heka'tan slipped and fell another half-metre. Gripping a twisted metal rebar, he looked up at the Ultramarine. There was blood on his face and one of his eyes was swollen shut.

'Save him.' He had to shout above the roar of the flames boiling below.

Arcadese's gaze flitted to Vorkellen, who was also stranded and clinging on desperately. The iterator peered down intermittently, white-faced and clammy.

The Ultramarine shook his head and reached harder, farther. 'You first. Reach up.'

'Protect the weak,' Heka'tan told him. 'No matter who that is.'

In no mood to debate, Arcadese growled, 'Reach up. Now!'

Still holding on with one hand, Heka'tan swung up the other and stretched. Their fingertips could almost touch.

'A little more…'

'It's too far. Get out while you can.'

Arcadese shook his head. 'We are so close…' he said. His face was wrenched with effort. He leaned and found purchase on Heka'tan's fingers…

…just as the Salamander's hand began to tremble. As the nerve tremor took hold it shook Arcadese's grip free. Heka'tan was flailing now. The explosions, the smoke and fire – he was reliving Isstvan all over again.

'Steady yourself… I can't…' Arcadese snatched at Heka'tan's shaking hand, but was unable to get a grip. 'Steady yourself, brother.'

Their eyes met, the reflection of the destruction trapped in the Salamander's locked there forever.

'Let me go,' he said, lowering his quivering hand. His voice was calm, his mind decided.

Arcadese raged, gesturing frantically. 'I can lift you. What are you doing?'

'Going to join my brothers.' He let go.

Bellowing denial and utterly powerless, the Ultramarine watched Heka'tan plummet for a few metres until he was swallowed by the explosions. Arcadese thumped the companionway, splitting the rockcrete. Nearby, Vorkellen was screaming.

'Don't let me die, please don't let me die…'

Bereft of all pity, of any feeling, his organic flesh as inured as his augmetic implants, Arcadese grabbed the iterator's wrist and dragged him up.

Just a few seconds later, a column of fire erupted skywards from where Vorkellen had been swinging. The human staggered to his feet. He was weeping uncontrollably. Arcadese picked him up and threw him over his shoulder.

Then he ran as the world of Bastion submitted to its death throes behind him.

III

From the shuttle hold, Arcadese looked down upon the ruination of a world. Cooking off in the wake of the incendiaries, Bastion's thermo-nuclear stockpiles were tearing the planet apart.

Long chains of fire stitched the world's surface like its seams had been unpicked and were slowly being burned apart. Continents

cracked and mountains sank. The oceans boiled to gas and the cities were consumed. Billions would look to the artificial nuclear sunrise, their retinas seared away in seconds, the skin of their bodies flaking like parchment only to become as ash on the wind. And even that was ephemeral, torn apart and scattered to oblivion by the blast wave that followed.

A small armada of ships had managed to achieve orbit; others had been swallowed up in the chaos, failing to achieve loft and put enough distance between themselves and the rapidly unfolding cataclysm.

They were headed for the Imperial starship at anchor on the edge of the system. Arcadese had already voxed a warning to its captain but no attack had come from any vessel affiliated with the Warmaster. The work here was done. The Iron Warrior had achieved his mission. Whatever the purpose of the schematics Heka'tan had described, it would not be discovered until it was too late. The message was sent. Horus wanted the galaxy to know, he had used Bastion as an example.

Ally with the Imperium and die.

Neutral planets would go down on bended knee for the Warmaster now, the threat of reprisals too real and absolute for them to ignore.

Heka'tan had believed in the possibility of a peaceful solution. Despite everything, he dared to hope that the Traitors would adhere to the rules of engagement.

Now, the Salamander was dead, slain like so many of his Legion.

Arcadese muttered an oath for the Nocturnean beneath his breath. 'You will not be forgotten, brother,' he promised. 'You shall have vengeance.'

The one responsible would be brought to account. Arcadese might have no place on the front line, but he could do that for a fallen brother. He could do that for all the forgotten sons of the Imperium.

The Last Remembrancer

John French

‘In an age of darkness the truth must die’

– Words of a forgotten scholar of ancient Terra

They murdered the intruder ship on the edge of the Solar System. It spun through space, a kilometre-long barb of crenellated metal, trailing the burning vapours of its death like the tatters of a shroud. Like lions running down a crippled prey two golden-hulled strike vessels bracketed the dying ship. Each was a blunt slab of burnished armour thrust through space on cones of star-hot fire. They carried weapons that could level cities and held companies of the finest warriors. Their purpose was to kill any enemy who dared to enter the realm they guarded.

This star system was the seat of the Emperor of Mankind, the heart of an Imperium betrayed by its brightest son. There could be no mercy in this place. The ship had appeared without warning and without the correct identification signals. Its only future was to die in sight of the sun that had lit the birth of humanity.

Explosions flared across the intruder ship’s hull, its skin splitting with ragged wounds that spilled dying crew and molten metal into the void. The two hunters silenced their guns and spat boarding torpedoes into the intruder’s flanks. The first armoured dart punctured the ship’s command decks, its assault ramps exploding open and disgorging amber-yellow armoured warriors in a roar of fire.

Each boarding torpedo carried twenty Imperial Fists of the Legiones Astartes: genetically enhanced warriors clad in powered armour who knew no fear or pity. Their enemy bore marks of loyalty to Horus, the Emperor’s son who had turned on his father and thrust the Imperium into civil war. Red eyes with slit pupils, snarling beast heads and jagged eight pointed stars covered the hull of the ship and the flesh of its crew. The air had a greasy quality, a meat stink that penetrated the Imperial Fists’ sealed armour as they shot and hacked deeper into the ship. Blood dripped from their amber-yellow armour and tatters of flesh hung from their chainblades. There were thousands of crew on the ship: dreg ratings, servitors, command crew, technicians and armsmen. There were only a hundred Imperial Fists facing them but there would be no survivors.

Twenty-two minutes after boarding the ship the Imperial Fists found the sealed doors. They were over three times the height of a man and as wide as a battle tank. They did not know what was inside but that did not matter. Anything kept so safe must have been of great value to the enemy. Four melta charges later, a glowing hole had been bored through two metres of metal. The breach still glowing cherry red the first Imperial Fist moved through, bolt pistol raised, tracking for targets.

The space beyond was a bare chamber, tall and wide enough to take half a dozen Land Raiders side by side. The air was still, untouched by the rank haze that filled the rest of the ship, as if it had been kept separate and isolated. There were no jagged stars scratched into the metal of the floor, no red eyes set into the walls. At first it seemed empty, and then they saw the figure at the centre of the room. They advanced, red target runes in their helmet displays pulsing over the hunched man in grey. He sat on the floor, the discarded remains of food and crumpled parchment scattered around him. Thick chains led from bolts in the deck to shackles around his thin ankles. On his lap was a pile of yellow parchment. His hand held a crude quill made from a spar of metal; its tip was black.

The sergeant of the Imperial Fist boarding squad walked to within a blade swing of the man. More warriors spread out into the echoing chamber, weapons pointing in at him.

‘Who are you?’ asked the sergeant, his voice growling from his helmet’s speaker grille.

‘I am the last remembrancer,’ said the man.

The nameless fortress hid from the sun on the dark side of Titan, as if turning its face from the light. A kilometre-wide disk of stone and armour, it hung in the void above the yellow moon. Reflected light from the bloated sphere of Saturn caught in the tops of its weapon towers, spilling jagged shadows across its surface. It had been a defence station, part of the network that protected the approaches to Terra. Now the treachery of Horus had given it a new purpose. Here in isolated cells suspected traitors and turncoats were kept and bled of their secrets. Thousands of gaolers kept its inmates alive until they were of no further use: until the questioners were finished with them. There were countless questions that demanded an answer and its cells were never empty.

Rogal Dorn would be the first primarch to set foot in the nameless fortress. It was not an honour he relished.

‘Vile,’ said Dorn, watching as the void fortress grew nearer on a viewscreen. He sat on a metal flight bench, the knuckles of his armoured gauntlet beneath his chin. The inside compartment of the Stormbird attack craft was dark, the light from the viewscreen casting the primarch’s face in corpse-cold light. Dark eyes set above sharp cheekbones, a nose that cut down in line with the slope of the forehead, a down-turned mouth framed by a strong jaw. It was a face of perfection set in anger and carved from stone.

‘It is unpleasant, but it is necessary, my lord,’ said a voice from the darkness behind Dorn. It was a low, deep voice, weighted with age. The primarch did not turn to look at the person who spoke, a grey presence standing on the edge of the light. There were just the two of them alone in the crew compartment. Rogal Dorn commanded the defence of Terra and millions of troops but came to this place with only one companion.

‘*Necessary*, I have heard that often recently,’ growled Dorn, not looking away from the waiting fortress.

Behind Dorn the shadowed figure shifted forwards. Cold electric light fell across a face crossed by lines of age and scars of time. Like the primarch, the figure wore armour, light catching its edges but hiding its colours in shadow.

‘The enemy is inside us, lord. It does not only march against us on the battlefield, it walks amongst us,’ said the old warrior.

‘Trust is to be feared in this war then, captain?’ asked Dorn, his voice like the growl of distant thunder.

‘I speak the truth as I see it,’ said the old warrior.

‘Tell me, if it had not been my Imperial Fists that found him would I have known that Solomon Voss had been brought here?’ He turned away from the screen and looked at the old warrior with eyes that had vanished into pits of shadow. ‘What would have happened to him?’

The flickering blue light of the viewscreen spilled over the old warrior. Grey armour, without mark or rank, the hilt of a double handed sword visible from where it projected above his shoulders. The light glittered across the ghost of a sigil on the grey of his shoulder guard.

‘The same as must happen now: the truth must be found and after that whatever the truth demands must be done,’ said the old warrior. He could feel the primarch’s emotions radiating out from him, the violence chained behind a facade of stone.

‘I have seen my brothers burn worlds we created together, sent my sons against my brothers’ sons. I have unmade the heart of my father’s empire and clad it in iron. You think I wish to avoid the realities that face us?’

The old warrior waited a heartbeat before replying. ‘Yet you come here, my lord. You come to see a man who, in all likelihood, has been corrupted by Horus and the powers that cradle him.’ Rogal Dorn did not move but the old warrior could feel the danger in that stillness like a lion poised for the kill.

‘Have a care,’ said Dorn, in a whisper like a sword sliding from a scabbard.

‘Trust is a weakness in our armour, lord,’ said the warrior, looking directly at the primarch. Dorn stepped forwards, his eyes deliberately tracing the bare grey surfaces of armour that should have displayed Legion heraldry.

‘A strange sentiment from you, Iacton Qruze,’ said Dorn.

The old warrior nodded slowly, remembering the ideals and broken oaths that had brought him to this point in time. He had once been a captain in the Luna Wolves Legion, the Legion of Horus. He was almost the last of his kind, and he had nothing left but his oath to serve the Emperor, and the Emperor alone.

‘I have seen the price of blind trust, my lord. Trust must be proved.’

‘And because of that we must throw the ideals of the Imperium to the flames?’ said Dorn, leaning close to Qruze. Such focus from a primarch would have forced most mortals to their knees. Qruze held Dorn’s gaze without faltering. He knew his role in this. He had made an oath of moment that he would stand watch over Rogal Dorn’s judgement. His duty was to balance that judgement with questions.

‘You have intervened, and so the judgement on this man is yours. He lives at your word,’ said Qruze.

‘What if he is innocent?’ snapped Dorn. Qruze gave a weary smile.

‘That proves nothing, my lord. If he is a threat he must be destroyed.’

‘Is that what you are here to do?’ said Dorn, nodding at the hilt of the sword on Qruze’s back. ‘To play judge, jury and executioner?’

‘I am here to help you in your judgement. I do this for the Sigillite. This is his domain and I am his hand in this.’

An expression that might have been distaste ghosted across Dorn’s face as he turned his back on Qruze.

On the viewscreen the side of the nameless fortress filled the screen; a toothed set of doors opening to greet them like a waiting mouth. Qruze could see a vast loading bay beyond lit by bright light. Hundreds of troops in gloss-red armour and silver-visored helmets waited in ranks, filling the docking bay floor. These were the gaolers of the nameless fortress. They never showed their faces and had no names, each was simply a number. Amongst them the hunched figures of the questioners stood in loose clusters, their faces hidden by hoods, fingers augmented with needles and blades protruding from the sleeves of their red robes.

The Stormbird settled on the deck with a purr of an antigravity field. Ice beaded its sleek body and wings as the warm air met void-cold metal. With a pneumatic hiss the ramp opened beneath the Stormbird’s nose and Rogal Dorn walked into the stark light. He shone, the light reflecting from the burnished gold of his armour, glittering from rubies clutched in the claws of silver eagles. A black cloak lined in red and edged in ivory fell from his shoulders. As one every person in the docking bay knelt, the deck ringing with the impact of a thousand knees. Rogal Dorn strode through the kneeling ranks without a glance. Behind him Iacton Qruze followed in his ghost-grey armour, like a shadow in the sun’s wake.

At the end of the ranks of crimson guards, three figures knelt and waited. Each wore armour the same gloss-red as the kneeling guards, their bowed heads encased by masks of tarnished silver. These were the key keepers of the nameless fortress. Qruze was one of the few people to have ever seen their faces.

‘*Ave Praetorian*,’ called one of the bowed figures in a booming electronic voice. With one voice every kneeling human echoed the call. The primarch spoke over the fading echoes.

‘Take me to the remembrancer Solomon Voss.’

The man was writing when the cell door opened. The light from the glow-globe above him created a murky yellow halo that cast all but the makeshift desk and the man into shadow. Thin shoulders hunched over a sheet of parchment, a quill in a thin hand scratching out black words. He did not look up.

Rogal Dorn stepped into the cell. He had removed his armour and wore a black tabard held around the waist with a belt of gold braid. Even without his battle-plate he seemed to strain the dark metal walls of the cell with his presence. Qruze followed, still in his grey armour.

'Solomon Voss,' said Dorn in a soft tone.

The man looked up at them. He had a flat, handsome face, the skin smooth and lined only around the eyes. His steel-grey hair was pulled back into a ponytail that hung over the rough fabric covering his back. In the presence of a primarch many people would struggle to speak. The man nodded and gave a tired smile.

'Hello, old friend,' said Voss. 'I knew someone would come.' His eyes flicked to Qruze. 'Not alone though, I see.' Qruze felt the disdain in the words but held his face impassive. Voss starred at him. 'I know your face from somewhere.'

Qruze did not reply. He knew who the man was, of course. Solomon Voss: author of *The Edge of Illumination*, witness to the first conquests of the Great Crusade, according to many the finest wordsmith of the age. Qruze had met Voss once, long ago in a different age. So much had left its mark on Qruze since then that he was surprised his old face triggered even the weakest memory in this man.

Voss nodded at the bare grey of Qruze's armour. 'The colours and markings of a Legion were always a mark of pride. So what does unmarked grey imply? Shame, perhaps?' Qruze kept his face emotionless. Such a remark would once have angered him. Now there was no false pride for it to cut. He had passed far beyond his lost life as a Son of Horus or Luna Wolf.

Dorn looked at Qruze, his face unreadable but his voice firm.

'He is here to observe, that is all.'

'The silent hand of judgement,' said Voss, nodding and turning back to the sheet of parchment. The quill began to scratch again. Dorn pulled a metal-framed chair close to the desk and sat, the chair creaking under his weight.

'I am your judge, remembrancer,' said Dorn in a low voice tinged with a tone that Qruze could not place.

Voss did not reply but completed a line of lettering. He made a low half-whistling noise as he paused over a word. Qruze thought he could see feelings play over the remembrancer's face, a twinge of apprehension and defiance. Then, with a flourish, the quill completed a line and Voss placed it on the desk. He nodded at the drying words and smiled.

'Done. In all honesty I think it is my best work. I flatter myself that you would not find its equal amongst the works of the ancients.' He turned to look at Dorn. 'Of course, no one will ever read it.'

Dorn gave a half-smile as if he had not heard the last remark and nodded at the pile of parchment on the desk.

'They let you have parchment and quill, then?

'Yes,' sighed Voss. 'I wish I could say it was kind of them, but I rather think that they hope to scour it for secrets afterwards. They can't quite believe I am telling the truth, you see, but they also can't stop hoping that I am. The information on your brother, you see. I can feel their hunger for it.' Qruze saw the slightest tightening in Dorn's face at the mention of his brother.

'You have been questioned?' asked Dorn.

'Yes. But the heavy stuff has not started. Not yet.' Voss gave a humourless laugh. 'But I have a feeling that it was not far off. Until they stopped asking questions and just left me here.' Voss raised an eyebrow. 'That was your doing?'

'I was not going to let the great Solomon Voss disappear into an interrogation cell,' said Dorn.

'I am flattered, but there are many more prisoners here, thousands I think.' Voss was looking around at the metal walls of his cell as if he could see through them. 'I can hear the screams sometimes. I think they want us to hear them. They probably think it makes us easier to question.' Voss's voice trailed away.

This man is broken, thought Qruze, something within him has died and left only a half life.

Dorn leaned towards Voss.

'You were more than a remembrancer,' said Dorn. 'Remember?'

'I was something once,' he nodded still starring into the darkness. 'Once. Back before Ullanor, when there were no remembrancers, when they were just an idea.' Voss shook his head and looked down at the parchment in front of him. 'It was quite an idea.'

Dorn nodded and Qruze saw the ghost of a smile on the primarch's normally grim face.

'Your idea, Solomon. A thousand artists sent out to reflect the truth of the Great Crusade. An idea worthy of the Imperium.'

Voss gave a weak smile. 'Flattery again, Rogal Dorn. Not *completely* my idea, as you must remember.' Dorn nodded and Qruze heard a note of passion in Voss's voice. 'I was just a wordsmith tolerated amongst the powerful because I could turn their deeds into words that could spread like fire.' Voss's eyes shone as if reflecting the light of bright memories. 'Not like the iterators, not like Sindermann and the rest of his manipulating ilk. The Imperial truth did not need manipulation. It needed reflecting out into the Imperium through words, and images and sounds.' He broke off and looked at the black ink stains on his thin fingers. 'At least, I thought so then.'

'You were right,' said Dorn and Qruze saw the conviction flow into the primarch's face. 'I remember the manuscripts you presented to the Emperor at Zuritz. Written by you and illuminated by Askarid Sha. They were beautiful and true.' Dorn was nodding slowly, as if trying to tease a response from Voss who was still looking at his hands. 'The petition to create an order of artists to "witness, record and reflect the light of truth spread by the Great Crusade". An order of people to be the Imperium's memory of its foundation: that was what you argued was needed. And you were right.'

Voss nodded slowly, then he looked up and there was a hollow look in his eyes. It was the look of someone thinking about what they

had lost, thought Qruze. He knew. He had worn it himself in many dark hours in recent years.

'Yes, fine times,' said Voss. 'When the Council of Terra ratified the creation of the Order of Remembrancers, for a moment I thought I knew what you and your brothers must have felt, seeing your sons bringing illumination to the galaxy.' He gave a dismissive snort. 'But you are not here to flatter, Rogal Dorn, you are here to judge.'

'You vanished,' said Dorn in the same soft tone he had begun with. 'In the moments after the betrayal you vanished. Where have you been?' Voss did not answer for a second.

'I have been telling the truth since your sons took me from that ship,' he said, and looked at Qruze. 'I am sure it is in their mission accounts.'

Qruze stayed silent. He knew what Voss had said to the Imperial Fists that found him, what he had been saying to his interrogators ever since. He knew, and Rogal Dorn would know, but the primarch said nothing. The silence waited until Voss looked at Dorn and said what the primarch had been waiting for.

'I have been with the Warmaster.'

Iacton Qruze kept his distance as the primarch watched the stars turn above him. They were in an observation cupola, a blister of crystal glass on the upper surface of the nameless fortress. Above them Saturn hung, its bands of muddy colour reminding Qruze of fat running through meat. Dorn had cut short the questioning of Solomon Voss, saying that he would return soon. He had said to Qruze that he needed to think. So they had come here to think beneath the light of the stars and the eye of Saturn. Qruze thought that Dorn had hoped that Voss would deny his earlier claim, that he would find a reason to set him free.

'He is as I remember him,' said Dorn suddenly, still gazing out at the scatter of stars. 'Older, worn, but still the same. No sign of corruption to my eyes.'

I must do my duty, thought Qruze. Even though it is like stabbing a blade into an unhealed wound. He took a deep breath before speaking.

'No, my lord. But perhaps you see what you want to see.' The primarch did not move but Qruze sensed the shift in atmosphere, a charge of danger in the cold air.

'You presume much, Iacton Qruze,' said the primarch in a low growl.

Qruze took a careful step closer to Dorn and spoke in a level voice. 'I presume nothing. I have nothing but one unbroken oath. That oath means I must say these things.' The primarch turned and straightened so that Qruze had to look up into his face. 'Even to you, lord.'

'You have more to say?' growled Dorn.

'Yes. I must remind you that the enemy is subtle and has many weapons. We can protect against them only with suspicion. Solomon Voss might be as you remember him. Perhaps he is the same man. Perhaps.' Qruze let the word hang in the air. 'But perhaps is not enough.'

'Do you believe his claim? That he was with Horus all this time?'

'I believe the facts. Voss has been amongst the enemy, whether willingly or as a captive. He was on a ship enslaved to Horus that bore the marks of the enemy. The rest could be...'

'A story.' Dorn was nodding, a grim expression on his face. 'He was the greatest teller of stories that I have ever known. There are billions in the Imperium that only know of our deeds by the words he wrote. You think that he is spinning a tale now?'

Qruze shook his head. 'I do not know, lord. I am not here to judge, I am here to question.'

'Then do your duty and question.'

Qruze took a breath and began to count off points, raising a finger for each one. 'Why did he go to Horus if he is not a traitor? Horus slaughtered the rest of the remembrancers when he purged the Legions. Why would he keep one of them alive?' When Dorn did not interrupt Qruze continued. 'And an enemy ship, with a single man held safe within it, does not drift into the Solar System alone.' He paused for a second, thinking of the thing that worried him most. Dorn was still looking at him, silently absorbing Qruze's words. 'It was not accident. He was returned to us.'

Dorn nodded, forming Qruze's worry into a question. 'And if he was, why?'

'Why did you go to Horus?' asked Rogal Dorn.

They were back in the cell. Solomon Voss sat by his desk with Rogal Dorn opposite him and Qruze standing by the door. Voss took a sip of spiced tea from a battered metal cup. He had asked for it and Dorn had assented. The remembrancer swallowed slowly and licked his lips before beginning.

'I was on Hattusa, with the 817th fleet, when I heard that Horus had rebelled against the Emperor. I could not believe it at first. I tried to think of reasons why, to put it into some form of context, to make some sense of it. I could not. But when I realised that I could not make sense of it I knew what I needed to do. I needed to see the truth with my own eyes. I would witness it and I would make sense of what I saw. Then I would put it into words so that others could share my understanding.'

Dorn frowned. 'You doubted that Horus was a traitor?'

'No. But I was a remembrancer, the greatest remembrancer. It was our duty to make sense of great events in art. I knew that others would doubt or would not believe that the brightest son of the Imperium could turn against it. If it was true I wanted that truth shouted from the works of as many remembrancers as possible.'

Qruze saw the passion and fire flash through Voss's face. For a moment the tiredness was gone and the man's conviction shone from him.

'You take much on yourself. To make sense of something that is senseless,' said Dorn.

'Remembrancers made what happened in the Great Crusade real. Without us who would remember any of it?'

Dorn shook his head gently. 'A war between the Legions is not a place for artists.'

'And the other types of wars we had been recording, were they more suitable? When all that had been built by you, by us, had been plunged into doubt, where else should I have been? I was a remembrancer; it was my duty to witness this war.' Voss put his cup of spiced tea down on his desk.

'I had started to make plans to get to Isstvan V by calling in favours and contacts.' Voss's mouth twisted as if chewing bitter words. 'Then the Edict of Dissolution came through. The remembrancers were no more, by the order of the Council of Terra. We were to be removed and dissolved back into mundane society. Those already amongst the war fleets were no longer to be allowed to record events.'

Qruze could feel the bitterness in the man's words. In the wake of the news of Horus's betrayal many things had changed in the Imperium. One of these changes had been the removal of official backing for the remembrancers. With a stroke of a pen the remembrancers had been no more.

Better that than what could have become of them, thought Qruze. The image of men and woman dying under the guns of his former brothers flicked across his mind. An age ago, but no time at all, he thought. He blinked and the cell snapped back into sharp reality.

'But you did not obey,' said Dorn.

'I was angry,' spat Voss. 'I was the father of the Order of Remembrancers. I had witnessed the centuries of the Great Crusade since it began on Terra. I had looked on demigods and the scattering of blood amongst the stars that has been the birth of the Imperium.' He raised his hand as if gesturing to stars and planets above them. 'I made those events real to minds that will never see them. I bound them in words so that those wars will echo into the future. In millennia to come there will be children who listen, or read, and will feel the weight of these times in my words.' He snorted. 'We remembrancers served illumination and truth, not the whim of a council of bureaucrats.' Voss shook his head, his lip curled for a moment and then he blinked.

'Askarid was with me,' he said quietly. 'She said that it was an impossible idea, dangerous and driven by ego. A pilgrimage of hubris, she called it.' He smiled and closed his eyes for a moment, floating in lost happiness.

Qruze knew the name Askarid Sha, illuminator and calligraphist. She had lettered Voss's work into scrolls and tomes as beautiful as his words.

'Your collaborator?' asked Qruze, the question slipping out of his lips. Dorn shot him a hard look.

'Yes, she was my collaborator, in every sense.' Voss sighed and looked at the dregs of tea in his cup. 'We argued, for days,' he said quietly. 'We argued until it was clear that I was not going to change my mind. I knew it was possible to get to Isstvan V. I had contacts throughout the fleets, on both sides of the war. I knew I could do it.'

Voss paused, staring into space as if someone stood there looking back at him from a lost past. Dorn said nothing, but waited. After a few moments Voss spoke, a catch in his voice.

'Askarid came with me, even though I think she feared how it would end.'

'And how did it end?' asked Dorn. Voss looked back at the primarch, his eyes still wide with memory.

'Isn't that what you are here to decide, Rogal Dorn?'

'He was right, about the Edict of Dissolution,' said Dorn. Voss had asked to sleep and Dorn had permitted it. He and Qruze had returned to the dome of crystal beneath the starfield. Qruze could feel the leaden mood of the primarch as he stood looking at the stars.

'The end of the remembrancers?' said Qruze, raising an eyebrow and looking up at Dorn. 'You think that they should be allowed to wander through this war? Recording our shame in paintings and songs?' There was a pause. Qruze expected another growl of rebuke but Dorn showed no emotion other than in the slow breath exhaling from his nose.

'I had my doubts when the Council ratified the edict,' said Dorn. 'The position as presented at the time was perfectly logical. We are at war with ourselves; we do not know how far the treachery of my brother spreads. This is not a time to allow a menagerie of artists to walk freely amongst our forces. This is not a war to be reflected in poetry. I understand that...'

'But beyond logic, you had doubts,' said Qruze. He felt that he suddenly understood why Rogal Dorn, Praetorian of Terra, had come to see an old remembrancer in a prison cell.

'Not doubts, sorrow.' Dorn turned, pointing out at the stars beyond the crystal glass. 'We went out into those stars to wage war for a future of enlightenment. We took the best artists with us so that they could reflect that truth. Now our battles go unremembered and unrecorded. What does that tell us?' Dorn let his hand fall.

'It is a practicality of the situation we face. The survival of the truth that we fought for makes demands that must be met,' said Qruze.

'Demands that must be wrapped in silence and shadow? Deeds done that must remain unremembered and unjudged?' Dorn began to walk away from the glass, his steps raising dust from the floor.

'Survival or obliteration: that will be history's judgement on us,' said the grey warrior.

Dorn turned to stare at Qruze, the ghost of anger on his face. 'And the only way is for the Imperium to become a cruel machine of iron, and blood?' said the primarch in a hard-edged whisper.

‘The future will have a price,’ said Qruze, not moving from the viewport. Dorn was silent. For an instant Qruze thought he saw a flicker of despair in the primarch’s eyes. Behind him the planets of the Solar System glittered as cold points of light beyond the towers of the nameless fortress.

‘What will we become, Iacton Qruze? What will the future allow us to be?’ said Dorn, and walked away without looking back.

‘When we reached Isstvan V the massacre was complete,’ continued Voss. ‘I never got the chance to see the surface, but the void around it sparkled with debris. I watched it drift past the viewport of my stateroom, fragments still cooling, fires feeding on oxygen trapped in wrecks.’

Dorn nodded, his face unreadable as he listened to the remembrancer’s story. Something had changed in the primarch after they returned from the observation deck. It was as if he had begun to wall something up inside him. It reminded Qruze of the gates of a citadel grinding shut before the advance of an enemy. If Voss noticed he did not show it.

‘They came for us, the Sons of Horus. It was not until I saw them that I began to think that I had misunderstood this civil war.’ Voss glanced at Qruze and the old warrior felt an ice-cold touch in his guts. ‘Metal, sea green metal, edged with bronze and covered with red slit eyes. Some had dried blood flaking from their armour. There were heads hanging on chains and by bunches of hair. They reeked of iron and blood. They said to come with them. Only one person asked why. I wish I could remember her name, but at the time I just wanted her to be quiet. One of them walked over to her and pulled her arms from her body, and left her screaming on the floor. We went with them after that.’ Voss paused, his eyes unfocused as if seeing the woman die again in her own blood.

Qruze found his hands had clenched, angry questions surging through his mind. Which one had it been? Which one of his former brothers had done that deed? One that he knew? One he had liked? He thought of the moment when he had learnt the truth about the men he had called brothers. The past can still wound us, he thought. He let out a quiet breath, releasing the pain. He must listen. For now, that was what he was here to do.

‘There were many remembrancers with you?’ asked Dorn.

‘Yes,’ said Voss with a shiver. ‘I had persuaded a number of others to come with me. Other remembrancers who agreed we had a duty to show the truth of this darkening age. Twenty-one came with me. There were others too, taken from the ships of the Legions who had only just showed their allegiance.’ Voss licked his lips, his eyes wandering again.

‘What happened to them?’ said Dorn.

‘We were taken to the audience chamber on the *Vengeful Spirit*. I had seen it once before, a long time before.’ Voss made a small shake of his head. ‘It was not the same place. The viewport still looked out on the stars like a vast eye and the walls still tapered to darkness above. But things hung from the ceiling on chains, dried mutilated things, that I did not want to look at. Ragged banners, splattered with dark stains, covered the metal walls. It was hot, like the inside of a cave beside a fire pit. The air stank of hot metal and raw meat. I could see the Sons of Horus standing at the edge of the room, still, waiting. And at the centre of it all was Horus.

‘I think I still thought I would see the pearl-white armour, the ivory cloak and the face of a friend. I looked at him and he was looking at me, right at me. I wanted to run, but I could not, I could not move to breathe. I could only stare back at that face framed by armour the colour of an ocean storm. He pointed at me, and said “All but that one.” His sons did the rest.

‘Three seconds of thunder and blood. When it was quiet I was on the deck on my hands and knees. Blood was pooling around my fingers. There was just blood and pulped meat all around me. The only thing I could think of was that Askarid had been stood beside me. I felt her hand around mine just before the shooting started.’ Voss closed his eyes, his hands held together in his lap.

Qruze found that he could not look away from those ink-stained hands, the skin wrinkled, the fingers gripped together as if clutching a memory.

‘But he kept you alive,’ said Dorn, his voice as flat and hard as a hammer falling on stone.

Voss looked up, his eyes meeting the primarch’s. ‘Oh yes. Horus spared me. He walked to stand above me; I could feel his presence, that chained ferocity, like a furnace’s heat. “Look at me,” he said and I did. He smiled. “I remember you, Solomon Voss,” he said. “I have cleansed my fleets of your kind: all but you. You I will keep. No one will harm you. You will see everything.” He laughed. “You will be a remembrancer,” he said.’

‘And what did you do?’ asked Dorn.

‘I did the only thing I could. I was a remembrancer. I watched every bloody moment, heard the words of hate, smelt the stink of death and folly. I think for a time I went mad,’ Voss chuckled. ‘But then I realised what the truth of this age is. I found the truth I had come to see.’

‘What truth is that, remembrancer?’ said Dorn, and Qruze could hear the danger in the words like an edge on a blade.

Voss gave a small laugh, as if at a child’s foolish question. ‘That the future is dead, Rogal Dorn. It is ashes running through our hands.’

Dorn was on his feet before Qruze could blink. Rage radiated from him like the heat of a fire. Qruze had to steady himself as Dorn’s emotion filled the room like an expanding thundercloud.

‘You lie,’ roared the primarch in a voice that had cowed armies.

Qruze waited for the blow to land, for the remembrancer to be nothing more than bloody flesh on the floor. No blow came. Voss shook his head. Qruze wondered at what the man must have seen to make this primarch’s rage blow over him as if it were a gust of wind.

‘I have seen what your brother has become,’ said Voss, carefully measuring his words. ‘I have looked your enemy in the eye. I know what must happen.’

‘Horus will be defeated,’ spat Dorn.

‘Yes. Yes, perhaps he will, but I still speak the truth. It is not Horus that will destroy the future of the Imperium. It is you, Rogal Dorn. You and those that stand with you.’ Voss nodded to Qruze.

Dorn leant down so that he was looking the man in the eye.

‘We will rebuild the Imperium when this war is done.’

‘From what, Rogal Dorn? From what?’ sneered Voss, and Qruze saw the words hit Dorn like a blow. ‘The weapons of this age of darkness are silence and secrets. The enlightenment of Imperial truth, those were the ideals you fought for. But you cannot trust any more, and without trust those ideals will die, old friend.’

‘Why do you say this?’ hissed Dorn.

‘I say it because I am a remembrancer. I reflect the truth of the times. The truth is not something this new age wants to hear.’

‘I do not fear the truth.’

‘Then let my words,’ Voss tapped his parchment, ‘be heard by all. I have written it here, everything I saw, every dark and bloody moment.’

Qruze thought of the words of Solomon Voss spreading through the Imperium, carried by the authority of their author and the power of their message. It would be like poison spreading through the soul of those resisting Horus.

‘You lie,’ said Dorn carefully, as if the words were a shield.

‘We sit in a secret fortress built on suspicion, with a sword over my head, and you say I lie?’ Voss gave a humourless laugh.

Dorn let out a long breath and turned away from the remembrancer. ‘I say that you have condemned yourself.’ Dorn moved towards the door.

Qruze made to follow but Voss spoke from behind them.

‘I think I understand now. Why your brother kept me and then let me fall into your hands.’ Dorn turned from the open cell door. Voss looked back at him, a weary smile on his face. ‘He knew that his brother would want to save me as a relic of the past. And he knew that I would never be allowed free after what I had seen.’ Voss nodded, the smile gone from his face. ‘He wanted you to feel the ideals of the past dying in your hands. He wanted you to look it in the eye as you killed it. He wanted you to realise that you two are much alike, still, Rogal Dorn.’

‘Bring me my armour,’ said Rogal Dorn, and red-robed serfs scuttled from the darkness. Each bore a section of gold battle-plate. Some pieces were so large and heavy that several had to carry them.

Dorn and Qruze stood once more in the observation dome. The only light in the wide, circular chamber was from the starfield above. Rogal Dorn had not spoken since he had left Voss in his cell, and Qruze had for once not dared to speak. Voss’s words had shaken Qruze. No mad ranting or proclamation of Horus’s greatness. No, this was worse. The remembrancer’s words had spread through him like ice forming in water. Qruze had fought it, contained it within the walls of his will, but it still clawed at his mind. What if Voss had spoken the truth? He wondered if it was a poison strong enough to burn the mind of a primarch.

Dorn had stood looking out at the stars for over an hour before he had asked for his armour. The serfs would normally have armoured Dorn, cladding him in his battle-plate piece by piece. This time he armoured himself, pulling a hard skin of adamantium over his flesh, framing his stone-set face in gold: a war god rebuilding himself with his own hands. Qruze thought that the primarch looked like a man preparing for his last battle.

‘He has been twisted, my lord,’ said Qruze softly and the primarch paused, his bare right hand about to slot into a gauntlet worked in silver with eagle feathers. ‘Horus sent him here to wound and weaken you. He said as much himself. He speaks lies.’

‘Lies?’ said the primarch.

Qruze steeled himself and asked the question he had feared to ask since they had left Voss’s cell. ‘You fear that he is right? That the ideals of truth and illumination are dead?’ said Qruze, an edge of urgency to his voice.

As soon as he spoke he did not want to know the answer. Dorn put his hand into the gauntlet, the seals snapping shut around the wrist. He flexed his metal-sheathed hand and looked at Qruze. There was a coldness in his eyes that made Qruze remember moonlight glinting from wolves’ eyes in the darkness of lost winter nights.

‘No, Iacton Qruze,’ said Dorn. ‘I fear that they never existed at all.’

The door to the cell opened, spilling the shadows of Rogal Dorn and Iacton Qruze across the floor. Solomon Voss sat at his desk facing the door as if waiting for them, his last manuscript on the desk at his side. Rogal Dorn stepped in, the low light catching the edges of his armour. He looked, thought Qruze, like a walking statue of burnished metal. There were no sounds other than the steps of the primarch and the hum of the glow-globes.

Qruze pulled the door shut behind them and moved to the side. Reaching behind his shoulder he gripped the hilt of the sword sheathed at his back. The blade slid out of its scabbard with a whisper sound of steel. Forged by the finest warsmiths at the command of Malcador the Sigillite, Regent of Terra, its double-edged blade was as tall as a mortal man. Its silvered surface was etched with screaming faces wreathed by serpents and weeping blood. It bore the name *Tisiphone*, in memory of a forgotten force of vengeance. Qruze rested the

blade point down, his hands gripping the hilt level with his face.

Voss looked up at the armoured figure of Rogal Dorn and nodded.

'I am ready,' said Voss and stood up, straightening his robe over his thin body, running a hand over his grey hair. He looked at Qruze. 'Is this your moment, grey watcher? That sword has waited for me.'

'No,' came the voice of Dorn. 'I will be your executioner.' He turned to Qruze and held out his hand. 'Your sword, Iacton Qruze.'

Qruze looked into the face of the primarch. There was pain in Dorn's eyes, unendurable pain locked behind walls of stone and iron, glimpsed for an instant through a crack.

Qruze bowed his head so that he did not need to look at Dorn's face, and held the sword out hilt first. Dorn took the sword with one hand, its size and weight seeming to shrink as he took it. He brought it up between him and Solomon Voss. The sword's power field activated with a crackle of bound lightning. The twitching glow of the blade cast the faces of both man and primarch in death-pale light and folds of shadow.

'Good luck, old friend,' said Solomon Voss, and did not look away as the blade fell.

Rogal Dorn stood for a moment, the blood pooling at his feet, the cell silent and still around him. He stepped towards the man's makeshift desk where the heap of parchment lay neatly stacked. With a flick, the power wreathing the blade vanished. Slowly, as if goading a poisonous serpent, Dorn turned the page with the tip of the deactivated blade. He scanned one line of text. *I have seen the future and it is dead*, it read.

He let the blade drop to the floor with a clang and walked to the cell door. As it opened he looked back at Qruze and pointed at the parchment and at the corpse on the floor.

'Burn it,' said Rogal Dorn. 'Burn it all.'

Rebirth

Chris Wraight

I have no idea how long I've been out. I should have; my enhanced memory and catalepsean function should have retained some trace, but everything is blank.

Presumably, that is part of the process. They want to induce doubt, to make me question whether I am up to this. If that is so, then they have succeeded. My total lack of recall preys on my mind. I do not like *not knowing*. It feels, certainly, like I've been ignorant of far too many facts for far too long.

But I am alive, and my hearts beat. That is something. Since coming round, I have had several minutes to reflect on my situation. That is useful too, though also no doubt part of some planned sequence.

I run down the basics, the physical aspects of my predicament. It helps, to force my mind into something mechanical. As I do so, I feel a degree of mental alertness returning.

I am in a chair. I am naked. My wrists, ankles, neck and chest are shackled with iron bands.

No, not iron – I'd be able to break that. Something similarly blunt and uncomfortable.

There is almost no light. I can make out the outline of my limbs dimly, but little else. My breathing is light, and there is an old pain behind my rib-fused chest. My secondary heart is still beating, indicating that I am recovering from some extensive trauma or exertion. I can feel no major wounds on my body, though there are many hundreds of bruises and abrasions, consistent with having been in action recently.

I have no mind-sight. I sense no souls nearby. For the first time since ascending into the ranks of the Legion, I remember what it is like to be alone with my own thoughts. At first, this is strangely comforting, like stumbling across a memento of a happy childhood.

But I do not take comfort for long, since my non-psychic senses are not as truncated. As my body adjusts and my faculties return, I realise that I am not alone. There is someone in the chamber with me, invisible in the dark. I cannot see him, but I can smell him and hear him. There is blood on his hands, and it makes the air of this confined chamber sharp and unsavoury. He breathes in ragged, shuddering draughts, like a panting animal held briefly at bay.

For the moment, that is all I sense. We sit in silence for a while longer, and I try to recall the events leading up to this moment. They come back to me only slowly, and in disconnected parts.

It takes a long time for him to speak. When he does, the voice takes me by surprise.

It is magnificent. There is tightly-contained savagery in that voice, a throat-wet growl that slips round the words and underpins each of them with a precise degree of mordant threat. I suspect this is no charade to make me uneasy, but simply the way my interrogator talks.

So the process begins the way these things always begin, the way a million interrogations have started since the dawn of organised violence.

'Tell me your name and company designation,' he says.

And for a moment, for a terrible moment, I realise that I cannot remember.

The Geometric pulled into high orbit, running silent, hull-lights extinguished. Two hundred kilometres down, the planet was almost as dark. It was void-black, laced with cracks of angry red where magma, or maybe surface fires, scored the crust.

Brother-Captain Menes Kalliston stood on the bridge of the destroyer and watched the approach through the realspace viewers. He was wearing battle-plate, but his head was bare. His dark eyes stayed fixed on the curve of the planet, now filling most of the plexiglass screens above him. His blunt, severe features were characteristically static. A slender patrician nose bisected rough-cut cheekbones. His flesh looked dry, like old parchment, and his burnt-umber hair was cropped close to the scalp. A single tattoo marked his right temple, an owl-archetype, symbol of the Athanaean cult discipline.

His armour was a deep, glossy red. His shoulder-guards were decorated in white and gold, picking out the icons and numerals of the Fourth Fellowship of the XV Legion Astartes, the Thousand Sons.

As he stood in contemplation, another figure came to join him. The new arrival had a stockier, shorter, more vigorous frame, and his features were closer to the Space Marine median – bull-necked, angular jaw, taut flesh over heavy bones. He might have been younger than the first, but the vagaries of gene-conditioning always made it so hard to tell.

'No enemy signals?' asked Kalliston, not turning.

'None,' confirmed Brother-Sergeant Revuel Arvida.

'And you sense nothing?'

Arvida, who was Corvidae, gave a rueful smile.

‘It’s not as easy as it used to be.’

Kalliston nodded.

‘No. That it isn’t.’

To Kalliston’s left, a control column blinked with several runes. A hololith emerged above it, a rotating sphere marked with precogitated atmospheric descent routes.

‘Landers are prepared, captain,’ said Arvida. ‘We can do this whenever you want.’

‘And you’re still not sure we should.’

‘You know I’m not.’

Only then did Kalliston turn from the viewers and look his subordinate in the eye.

‘I’ll need you down there,’ he said. ‘I don’t care what the augur readings say, it’ll be dangerous. So, if your hearts aren’t in this, tell me now.’

Arvida returned the gaze steadily, the ghost of a smile on his lips.

‘So I get to choose which missions I go on?’

‘I won’t force you to come on this one.’

Arvida shook his head.

‘That’s not how it works. You’ll go, and I’ll follow, as will the rest of the squad. You’ve convinced them, at any rate.’

‘They needed little convincing.’

‘There are other mysteries to solve, and I don’t see how coming here helps with those.’

Kalliston let a flicker of exasperation escape from the edges of his severe expression.

‘We have to start somewhere.’

‘I know. And, like I said, if you’re sure about this, then I’ll be with you. Just be sure.’

Kalliston looked back up at the vision in the realspace viewers. The planet had a deathly aura to it, one that would have been evident even to the most warp-blind of mortals. The gaps between the rivers of fire were a deep sable, like shafts opening out onto nothingness. Something vast and terrible had happened there, and the residues of it were still echoing.

‘I am sure, brother,’ he said, and his voice was firm. ‘We were preserved for a reason, and that gives us responsibilities. We’ll make planetfall on the night-side of the terminator.’

His dark eyes narrowed, scrutinising the close view of the planet’s hemisphere. It looked like he was trying to conjure up a vision of something long gone, something destroyed beyond recovery.

‘Less than six months since we were ordered to leave,’ he said, talking to himself now. ‘Throne, Prospero has changed.’

‘Menes Kalliston, Captain, Fourth Fellowship, Thousand Sons.’

I remember that after a few moments, and the words come quickly to my parched lips. That is what one is meant to say, I believe – name, rank and serial number.

Perhaps I should resist saying more, though I feel strangely reluctant to stay silent. They may have injected loquazine into my bloodstream, but I doubt it. I see no reason not to talk for a while. After all, I have no idea why I’m here, or what’s going on, or how long I will be alive.

‘What are you doing on Prospero?’ he asks.

‘I could ask you the same thing.’

‘You could. And I could kill you.’

I think he wants to kill me. There’s something in the voice, some timbre of eagerness, that gives it away. He’s holding himself back. He’s a Space Marine, I guess. There’s very little else like that voice, rolling up from those enhanced lungs and that muscle-slabbed gullet and that great barrel-chest like water from a deep mill.

We are brothers then, of a sort.

‘What do you know of the destruction of this planet?’ he asks.

His voice hasn’t been raised yet. He speaks carefully, keeping the tide of violence in check. It would not take much to break that dam.

‘We were ordered to leave orbit six months ago,’ I say. The truth seems the best policy, at least for now. ‘Some questioned it, but I did not. I never doubted the orders of my primarch. It was only later, when we could not make contact, that we realised something was wrong.’

‘How much later?’

‘Weeks. We’d been in the warp.’

‘Why did you not come back at once?’

Ah, yes. I have asked myself that many times. As the questions come, I remember more of myself. I still cannot recall what led me to this place, though. The blank is complete, like a steel mask over the past. There is an art to making such a mask, and it is not easy to master. I realise the calibre of those who have me captive.

‘I wanted to. Others did not. We made enquiries through astropaths, but our battle-codes were rejected whenever we made contact. Soon after that, our ships were attacked. By you, I presume, or those in league with you.’

Does my guess hit home? Am I nearing the truth? My interrogator gives no sign. He gives nothing away but the smell of blood and the hot, repeated breathing in the dark.

'Did many of you survive?'

'I don't know. Dispersal was the only option.'

'So your ship came here alone.'

'Yes.'

Should I be more evasive? I really don't know. I have no strategy, no objective. None of the information I give him seems important. Perhaps it would do, if I could remember more of the circumstances of my capture.

My mind-sight remains dark. To be confined to the five senses of my birth has become crippling. I realise then that the withdrawal will only get worse. I don't know whether it's permanent, or some feature of the chamber I'm in, or a temporary injury. As an Athanaean, I have become used to picking up the mental images of others shimmering beyond their faces, like a candle flickering behind a cotton sheet.

I'm handling its removal badly. It's making me want to talk, to find some way of filling the gap. And, in any case, I don't need psychic senses to detect the extremity of my interrogator. He's cradling some enormous capacity for rage, for physical violence, and it's barely in check. This is either something I can use, or it places me in terrible danger.

'Even so, it took you a long time to come back,' he remarks.

'Warp storms held us. They were impenetrable for months.'

My interrogator laughs then, a horrifying sound like throat-cords being pulled apart.

'They were. Surely you know what caused them.'

I sense him leaning forwards. I can see nothing, but the breathing comes closer. I have a mental image of a long, tooth-filled mouth, with a black tongue lolling out, and have no idea how accurate it is.

'You were either blessed, or cursed, that you made it through,' he says, and I feel the joy he takes in the control of my fate. 'I have yet to determine which it will be, but we will come to that soon.'

There were no Stormbirds left in the hold, and the *Geometric* had never carried Thunderhawks, so the descent had to be in a bulk lander. The destroyer's crew had been whittled down to a bare skeleton – a couple of hundred mortals, some still in Spireguard livery. In times past they would have looked up at their Legiones Astartes masters in awe as they worked to prepare the lander, but the events of the last few months had shaken that hold. They had seen the ruin of Prospero for themselves, and it had crushed what spirit remained in them.

Many, perhaps, had had family still on the planet when destruction came. Those connections, Kalliston knew, were important to mortals. He himself couldn't remember what it was like to find such things significant, but he felt the loss in other ways.

After launch, the lander fell through the thickening atmosphere clumsily, responding to the pilot's controls like an over-enthusiastic steed. The control column had been designed for smaller hands than a Space Marine's, and the atmosphere was still clogged with clouds of ash, blown across the charred terrain below by the angry remnants of continent-wide storms.

The lander made planetfall hard, jarring the crew against their restraint-cages as the retro-burners struggled against the inertia of the plummet. None of the squad members spoke. The cages slammed up, freeing them to take up their weapons. Kalliston, Arvida and the other battle-brothers in the load-bay mag-locked bolters and power-blades smoothly before the rear doors wheezed open.

The air of Prospero sighed into the load-bay. Kalliston could taste the afterglow of the furnace through his helm's rebreather. The atmosphere was still warm, still bitter with floating motes of ruin.

Night had fallen. The sky was the dark red of an old scab, broken with patches of messy shadow where the smog-clouds raced. Ruined buildings broke the horizon in all directions, skeletons of libraries and treasure houses, armouries and research stations. There was no sound save the winding-down of the lander's twin engines and the enervated brush of the hot wind.

Kalliston walked down the ramp first. His boot crunched as he came off the end of it. He looked down. The earth of Prospero glistened. A carpet of glass fragments lay there, as deep and smooth as a dusting of snow.

Everything was glass, once. The pyramids, the libraries, the galleries. Now, it is our dust.

'Sweep pattern,' he ordered over the vox. 'Ranged weapons. Rendezvous point Aleph.'

The remaining Space Marines spread out slowly from the embarkation point. The two who'd piloted the ship during the descent remained to guard it, stationed at the end of the ramp under the shelter of the rear fuselage. The seven others lowered bolters and walked as stealthily as they could across the glittering glass-dust. They organised themselves into a rough semi-circle, each brother heading for a different point in the line of buildings ahead. They stayed within a hundred metres of one another, opening out into a wide net. Steadily, they began to sweep though the devastated streets ahead.

Kalliston blink-clicked a rune to enhance his night vision lens-feed. The terrain around him shimmered into false colour contours. There were no target runes, no life-signs, no proximity warnings. The sterile bones of the shattered buildings loomed up towards him from the heat-hazed dark.

There was no chatter over the comm. The battle-brothers went reverently. They were treading on the tombs of their home world.

Kalliston raised his head fractionally, watching as a tall spur of metal emerged from the dark. It was over a hundred metres tall, but as thin as a burned-out tree-trunk. It had once supported a much bigger construction, but now tottered alone, a rare survivor of the firestorms that had raged through Tizca.

The City of Light. The home of our people.

'Are you getting anything, brother-captain?' came Arvida's voice over a private channel.

Arvida had moved slightly ahead of the others, and his route had taken him out of formation. On another mission, Kalliston might have rebuked him for that.

'Negative,' replied Kalliston, keeping any emotion out of his voice. He could sense Arvida's scepticism even from a hundred metres distant. Back on Prospero, Kalliston's mind-scrying abilities had returned to their peak, and the moods of his squad were transparent to him.

'There may be nothing left to get,' said Arvida.

'It's possible.'

'So how long are we going to look?'

'I'll determine that. Reserve your energies for the hunt, brother.'

Kalliston cut the comm-link.

The squad pressed on, passing deeper into the shattered city. Darkness clung to the bases of the ruined walls, squatting in the eaves of plasma-charred doorways that led nowhere.

Kalliston felt his boot crunch through something fragile, and looked down. A ribcage lay there, shattered by his heavy tread, as brittle and black as coal. It wasn't big enough to be an adult's.

He looked further up the street. Bones were strewn everywhere ahead, all of them human-sized.

Briefly, something flickered on his helm-display. Kalliston was instantly alert, though the signal, a threat rune on the edge of his armour's detector range, disappeared as soon as it had come.

'Captain,' voxed Phaeret, one of his squad members. 'You'll want to see this.'

Kalliston blink-clicked an acknowledgement. The threat rune didn't make another appearance on his display. Possibly a false reading, or some malfunction in the long-range augurs in his armour.

Both those possibilities were unlikely. Kalliston kept his boltgun muzzle in firing position as he walked towards Phaeret's location marker, and his senses remained alert. He was perfectly aware of the danger, and perfectly aware of the opportunity.

Something else was alive on Prospero.

'So how did you feel, seeing the destruction of your home world?'

The question surprises me. What does it matter, what I feel about anything? If this is an interrogation by a member of the forces occupying the planet, I would have expected questions on the disposition of the remains of my Legion, on the lingering capabilities of the survivors – something, at least, about military matters.

But then, there is much that is strange about this interrogation. I have the overwhelming feeling that I am not just here for the information I can provide. No, this unseen questioner wants something else.

'Uncomfortable,' I reply. 'But nothing more than that. We knew something of what to expect. My deputy is a seer, and he had made us aware of what had happened in its broadest outline.'

At the mention of Arvida, I wonder if he still lives. Perhaps he is being questioned in a cell like this too, or maybe he lies dead in the glass dust of the city.

'Uncomfortable?' he repeats.

The word seems to irritate him, and the breathing becomes more erratic.

'You were spineless,' he says, and the voice is harsh and accusatory. 'You come back here, like damned reclamators, picking through the rubble of what you let be destroyed. If this had been my world I'd never have left it. I'd have killed any invader who dared come close to it, and damned be my primarch's orders. You were weak, Captain Kalliston. Weak.'

He insists on the term, spitting it out. I sense his body coming closer. He is looming in the dark now, just beyond the ends of my chair-arms. Exhalations brush against my face, hot and caustic, like the breath of a dog.

'If we'd known–' I begin, starting to defend myself. I don't know why I feel the urge to do this. It doesn't matter what the questioner thinks of me, for my own conscience is untroubled.

'If you'd known!' he roars, cutting short my half-hearted response. Droplets of spittle hit my face. For a moment I think he's flown into a rage, but then I realise he's laughing. 'Listen to yourself, Thousand Son. You've always been so proud, strutting across worlds conquered by the prowess of other Legions, glorying in your superior understanding of what we uncovered for you. Not for you the dirty work of fighting with your hands. Oh, no. There were always other fighters to do that for you, to take on the danger at close-quarters, freeing you up to spend those hours in your libraries. Did you ever guess how much we all held you in contempt?'

'We knew well enough,' I say.

It's perfectly true – we knew just how much our brothers mistrusted us, and as a result worked hard not to provoke them. He's entirely wrong that we gloried in our superior understanding. Instead, we hid it, tried to show it as little as possible. Those instincts, as it turns out, may well have been mistaken.

'You knew? You could have fought like warriors, rather than drift into witchery. You had choices. I don't understand you.'

Did we have choices? Prospero was a world soaked in the psychic possibility of the Great Ocean. We were all touched by it, for better or worse. I don't think we could have turned down the opportunities that gave us, even though we knew it made the other Legions

uneasy.

Ultimately, though, the question is pointless. We did what we did, and no power in the universe has ever been able to undo the past.

'We fought,' I reply, remembering the conquest of Shrike, when Magnus himself had led us in war. He'd been magnificent, unstoppable, just as much as Russ or Lorgar, every bit the vision of the Emperor's most favoured son. 'We played our part.'

'No longer,' comes the riposte, savage with satisfaction. 'Your part is over. Your pyramids are destroyed, and your bastard primarch's back broken.'

He hates us. The hatred has not diminished with the humbling of my Legion. That may be why he brought me here. To gloat. My mind-sight is beginning to return, and I sense enormous frustration boiling within him. He has been left behind while others have departed for further conquest. This is one source of his anger. Soon, he will vent it on me.

But I cannot believe that is the only motivation. I am aware still how little I know. Why was Prospero destroyed? What, exactly, brought that doom upon us? The ignorance of that is more torture than anything this interrogator has planned for me. To die without uncovering those truths would be the most shameful way to go, and one that would vindicate Arvida's doubts about coming back.

Can I use the instability in my questioner to my advantage? Would he let slip secrets if I goaded him? A dangerous course of action – his cooped-up rage is like that of a beast, wild and indiscriminate. But then, there is little for me to lose. My Legion is scattered, my primarch missing, my home world blasted into a ball of lifeless slag. I would like some answers before he loses control of the furnace within him and ends this conversation for good.

'Magnus is not dead,' I say. 'I would know if he'd died. It was in the hope of finding him that we came back here. You, though, seem to know everything about us and what happened to our planet. You hint at more, things that I can only guess at. Since you know so much, and I know so little, should it not be me asking the questions?'

In the near-complete dark, I make out only the sharpest flash of dirty-grey. A gauntlet plunges out of the shadow and grabs my neck. The fingers squeeze painfully, just below the chin and just above the metal band that holds my head in place.

'You are *prey* for me, traitor,' comes the bloody rumble of a voice. 'Nothing more than that. Forget it, and I will end you with agony.'

The threat means little. As I struggle to breathe, though, I realise something else. My aether-drawn powers are returning. They are weak, to be sure, but they are creeping back to me in drabs. Perhaps he knows this, perhaps he doesn't. In any case, I have a glimmer of a chance now. The longer this thing lasts, the stronger I will become. Maybe, just maybe, strong enough to break these bonds.

The Ungifted Warriors have always underestimated what can be done with the mind, no doubt because we gifted have always been reluctant to use our skills unless pressed by necessity.

He releases his fist, and I gulp in draughts of blood-tanged air. He withdraws, though I can still feel him seething. He keeps his anger on an uncertain leash, as if it were a ravening predator continually tugging at its inadequate restraint.

'How many were in your squad?' he asks, recovering his poise with difficulty.

That's good. I hope he has many such questions. I will answer them all fully, all the while letting my control over the aether return.

'Nine,' I say, and though my speech is grudging and surly, in my mind there already kindles an eager anticipation for what is to come. 'There were nine of us.'

By the time Kalliston arrived, Phaeret was crouched down before the base of a pillar. The shaft was broken off about two metres up and rubble littered the surroundings. There were more ruined remnants of other buildings ahead, some no more than swaying spurs hanging over the curves of blast craters.

'What is it?' Kalliston asked, coming down to the same level.

Phaeret gestured towards the ground, saying nothing.

There was a gauntlet lying amid the blasted stone. Kalliston picked it up, turning it over to make the most of the light. It was gunmetal-grey and ready to fall into pieces. The construction was Legiones Astartes power armour – no mortal would have been able to wear such gear. Two of the fingers were missing, and the hollow stumps were black from burning. On the back of it, where the main ceramite plate guarded the warrior's fist, a rune had been inscribed. There was nothing clumsy about it. Even Kalliston, who was by no means an expert on artificer tech, could see the careful workmanship.

'And which of our brothers makes use of the runes?' he asked, speaking to himself.

His mind went back to the assault on Shrike, the name his Legion had given to Ark Reach Secundus. It was there that Magnus and Russ had first clashed over the preservation of the avenians' libraries. That had been a terrible day. Kalliston had been there when the Wolf King had stormed across the causeway with terrible violence in his eyes, and it had seemed as if Space Marine would fight Space Marine. He remembered the sheer majesty of the Wolves of Fenris, the terrifying potency locked into their single-minded frames. True, they had been stopped by sorcery for a time, but the barrier would have broken eventually. They would have kept on coming, heedless of the casualties, spinning into contact like a shell loosed from a gun-barrel.

Remorseless. The power that, once loosed, can never be called back.

'This is their work,' said Phaeret, and his young voice was savage with emotion. 'The Wolves of Fenris.'

Kalliston stood, his eyes still locked on the gauntlet.

They had always been the primary suspects. The bad blood between Magnus and Russ had been well-known, as had the capability of the Wolves for sudden and unpredictable brutality. The trial at Nikaea had been at the instigation of Russ, so it was rumoured. The Wolf King's hatred of sorcery had given him the pretext, and it seemed that he had acted on his intolerance at last.

But how had such a thing been dared? Had Russ gone rogue, finally giving in to the barbarism that burned in his feral soul? Or had this thing been sanctioned by a higher power?

The more Kalliston gazed at the gauntlet, letting his eyes run over the single rune etched into the ceramite glove, the more questions clamoured at him. It was one thing knowing the perpetrator of an act; quite another to understand his reasons.

'Captain,' voxed Arvida, breaking into Kalliston's train of thought. 'Evidence. There are traces of Space–'

'I know it,' said Kalliston, a dead weariness hanging on the words. 'Russ's dogs.'

'Armour fragments,' confirmed Arvida. 'And they've carved things in the walls. Some of them are... obscene.'

Kalliston felt a stab of anger then. They were brutes, the Wolves, as shallow and thuggish as greenskins. He'd never understood what place they'd had in the Great Crusade, other than to ruin the reputation of enlightened humanity and stain the achievements of Unification. Only Angron's berserkers were worse, and at least they'd been taken under the wing of the Warmaster. There had been no such wise, restraining hand to keep the Wolves of Fenris within civilised parameters, and it looked like they'd finally lost any semblance of control.

'We're getting more signs, the further we go,' replied Kalliston, speaking to the whole squad over the mission channel. 'Head to the Pyramid of Photep, where we'll regroup.'

Phaeret started to move off immediately, but Arvida maintained the comm link.

'There may still be Wolves on the planet,' he warned. 'Is this zone clear of targets?'

'I read nothing,' replied Kalliston, giving away his irritation. Arvida was only doing his job, but something about the sergeant's drip-feed of scepticism was getting under his skin. 'Move to heading–'

Even as he spoke, Phaeret's head and shoulders disappeared in a cloud of whirling armour, bone and blood. The booming report of heavy weapons echoed down the street, followed by the sharp clatter of bolter fire.

Kalliston threw himself behind the pillar, feeling the stone tremble as the reactive rounds thumped into it and blasted the stone open. He scrambled backward, away from the firestorm and into the lee of a more solid wall-section. As he went, more shells impacted around him, throwing up glittering waves of glass.

There were cries of alarm over the comm, and a thin recording of bolter-fire. His squad were all coming under fire. Two more life-sign runes dropped out of his helm-display.

Throne, where are they coming from?

'Heavy incoming!' reported Orphide, two hundred metres away. 'Getting multiple–'

Then his signal wavered and died, leaving static on the channel.

'Lock on to my position!' ordered Kalliston, whirling round, trying to make the best sense of the terrain around him. There were plenty of cover-points in the ruined cityscape, but nothing much that would stand up to concerted assault. 'Fall back to this location. Repeat, fall back to this location.'

He risked a look through a gap in the wall, keeping his helm as low as possible. There were still no target runes on his helm display, but auspexes could be jammed.

Two hundred metres distant, at the far end of the desolate street, he saw movement for the first time. Something pale grey flitted between cover, head low, moving fast. The profile was unmistakable – Space Marine power armour. Kalliston saw no others, but knew there'd be more out there. He checked the magazine was locked in place and that the ammo counter read full. His hearts had begun to beat in that steady, deep rhythm that always preceded action. He felt the familiar prickle across his skin as stimms entered his bloodstream and primed the muscle-nerve interfaces of his carapace.

'This is my world, dogs,' he snarled, his voice eager. 'So you're going to have to fight me for it.'

'Nine of you,' he says. 'Nine fools. You seem to have had few plans, other than to sniff around in the ruins and look for scraps. Did it never occur to you that the destroyers of Prospero would leave troops behind?'

'Of course it did.'

'And you still came.'

I briefly ponder whether to try my luck again. I can make him angry so easily, but there is the question of timing. For the moment, I restrain myself.

'Yes. Our position was in any case bleak. We were alone, separated from what remained of our fleet. In such a position of ignorance, we were vulnerable. I decided to seek survivors on Prospero, perhaps the primarch himself. We knew that there were unlikely to be any, but there were other reasons to – as you say – sniff around in the ruins.'

There was a minuscule pause then, a slight catch in the otherwise metronomic regularity of the breathing.

'Other reasons?'

I decide to keep talking, to stick to the truth. This interrogation will be coming to an end soon in any case.

'Prospero was the greatest seat of learning in all the worlds of men,' I say, and make no effort to keep the pride out of my voice. 'There were libraries here that were the envy even of the ancient races. There were secrets in our vaults, secrets that even we hadn't fully had the time to unlock properly. While you were sailing across the sea of stars, plundering and maiming, we were learning.'

As I speak, I recall using much the same words to persuade Arvida of the wisdom of returning home. He'd listened just as intently as my questioner did now.

‘You speak of witchery,’ I say. I dare a little more. ‘You know nothing of it. There are subtleties to the Great Ocean that only we understood. We could peer into the very stuff of the warp and make sense of the patterns there. We saw glimpses of the future, of possibilities more magnificent than there are words to describe.’

I begin to enthuse myself. I remember the devices that we used for learning, for discovery, for healing – the enormous potential that they had. We were like children, stepping into a dimension of wonder, our eyes glistening from the reflected glory.

‘I thought that, if some of those things survived, then we could retrieve them. If the fates determined that we were to be cast adrift, we could at least make some use of the tools that we’d accumulated.’

‘Did you find any?’

He is still eager, hungry for information now. The scorn has left his voice, replaced by something like need. Perhaps he has no idea how transparent he is. Odd, that he should be so brittle. I’d always imagined the Wolves being more sure of themselves.

‘No,’ I say, deflating his hopes as bluntly as I can. ‘We had no time. And, in any case, I doubt anything could have survived the mess you made of this place. You have destroyed everything. If I’d known it was you behind this carnage, I’d have expected nothing less. You are butchers and psychopaths, sadists and morons, the lowest of the–’

I know what I’m doing. His psychology is increasingly open to me. I raise his hopes, then dash them. I sense the fragility of his mind, and strike where I know the pain will be greatest.

I only stop speaking as the fist crashes into my jaw. Even inured as I am to physical shock, it staggers me. He moves fast; far faster than I could have done. I feel bone breaking, my jawline fragmenting, and my head jarring back against the metal of the chair. Pain flares up, hot and bright behind my eyes. Then a secondary bloom of agony, rolling across my face.

‘You know nothing of us!’ he roars, and the voice is instantly unhinged with rage.

Groggily, I realise I have unleashed something of incredible magnitude, and my stomach tightens.

He strikes me again, using his other fist, and my head bounces painfully from its bonds. What little vision I had disappears, to be replaced by a red-black, blotchy haze. Something else – a boot? – thuds into my exposed midriff, cracking my fused ribs and driving the plates in.

‘Nothing!’ he bellows, and a whole curtain of saliva slaps across my ruined cheeks. He is screaming into my face.

I can summon nothing against this. I have moved too soon, and he will surely kill me. More hammer-blows impact, breaking my skin, tearing my muscles, shivering the bone beneath. My head rocks on my neck like a top, cracked back and forth by the casual, deadly fists. If it were not for my restraints keeping me in check, my neck would be severed clean by now.

Then he stops. Merciful Throne, he stops.

I hear him raging still, incoherent with mania. He paces back and forth, trying to rein in whatever dark forces I have unleashed. I gasp for breath, feeling my punctured lungs labour. My head feels swollen with blood. The world reels around me, thick and dizzy with pain.

His breathing is like an animal’s, ragged and laced with moisture. For a long time, he doesn’t speak. I don’t think he can. It takes time for the rage to subside.

‘You know nothing of us,’ he growls again, and the voice has resumed its terrifying, purring threat.

I cannot respond. My own lips are puffy and cracked, and I feel my blood clotting in hard nodes within my wounds.

‘So certain,’ he spits, and I feel a slug of oily phlegm hit my body. ‘You’re so damned certain. And yet, as it turns out, you know even less than you think.’

He comes close again, and I smell his sour aroma. That odour gives much away. There is a bestial quality to it, like the sodden flank of an old hunting dog, but there’s something else. Chemical, perhaps.

‘You still don’t know why I brought you here,’ he says. His contempt is needle-keen. ‘Time to shed some light.’

As he says it, wall-mounted lumens flare into life. The sudden exposure only adds more pain to the riot of it in my head, and my bruised eyes screw shut. It takes time for them to open again, gingerly, the lids trembling under flakes of dried blood.

For the first time, I can see my questioner. As I look into his face, blurry and floating amid the harsh lights, I finally make out some detail, some identity.

It is then that I realise, just as he said I would, that I know nothing at all.

Revuel Arvida ran fast, keeping his head low, watching where his boots fell carefully. He reached his destination, a tall column of semi-melted metal on the corner of what had once been an intersection between two transit corridors.

He slid down against the broken column and risked a look round the corner. The body of Orphide lay in the middle of the open street. On either side of him the hollow carcasses of buildings stretched away down the long avenue. There was no visible movement.

He glanced at the proximity readings on his helm display. No enemy signals, and three of his battle-brothers dead. Three other active signals were converging on Kalliston’s location, a few hundred metres distant. Arvida was furthest away, out of position and isolated.

The city was whisper-quiet, but Arvida’s aural amplifiers picked up a faint shuffling from a long way down the street. Something was moving towards him, sheltered by the drifting smog and the urban ruins.

He crouched down with his back against the metal. Arvida was Corvidae, a master of the shifting patterns of the future. Back on his home world and surrounded by its familiar resonance, he felt particularly powerful. He allowed his consciousness to rise quickly through the enumerations.

He saw paths stretching away from him, overlaid onto the pattern of the streets around him. There were many clear possibilities, each running amid the others like a herd of panicked, stampeding prey. Some routes were obscured, but many were clear. He saw the approach of his enemy, their movements and their tactics. They had encircled Kalliston's position. There were dozens of them.

'Brother-captain,' he voxed. 'Advise retreat to the lander. There's too ma–'

Arvida broke off, sensing footfalls closing rapidly. The footfalls hadn't happened yet, but they would soon. His future-sense was shadowing the world around him, exposing the immediate course of events in a ghostly superimposition on the present.

He got to his feet and retreated back the way he'd come. He went quickly, keeping his bolter held ready at chest height.

There was no reply from Kalliston over the comm. Jammed, perhaps. The enemy seemed to know all their weaknesses. How long had they lain in wait, planning for this?

He reached the end of another shattered avenue. Four roads met there, and a blackened statue of Qeras the Episteme still stood at the intersection. The charred eyes gazed east, though lines of oil ran down the stone.

Arvida saw the incoming future-trails of the enemy like hololiths, and acted accordingly. They were moving to intercept him. Several had come down the street where Orphide lay. Two others had tracked back across a block and were heading towards his current position, closing fast.

Arvida shrank back into the shadow of the statue, waiting for them to come into view. They arrived in moments, only just behind their future-trails, hunting eagerly as if they knew their own doppelgangers were almost within blade-range.

Arvida let them pass him, then whirled round and out of cover. He took aim quickly, loosing two shots from his bolter. They were locked at the heads of the enemy, one for each. The first shell impacted perfectly, exploding as it snapped into the back of a pale, bloodstained helm. The target rocked, stumbled forwards, and smashed heavily to the ground. A flurry of glass shards flew up as he crashed earthwards.

But precognition was never perfect. The second shell grazed the other Space Marine's armour, knocking him off-balance but failing to drop him. The warrior regained his poise almost instantly, falling low and twisting round. A brace of white-hot plasma bolts flew directly at Arvida.

By then the Corvidae had already moved, darting back into the protection of the statue as the energy-pulses hammered into the stone. It broke open on the second impact, cracking from head to foot and toppling into pieces. Arvida burst left from the tumbling remnants, squeezing off another controlled salvo from his bolter.

His enemy hadn't stood waiting to be hit, but had closed in for the kill. He had a chainaxe in his left hand, buzzing like a furious swarm of insects. His movements were powerful and fast, aimed perfectly and backed up with crushing force. The chainaxe whirred in close, going for the chest then suddenly banking up towards Arvida's neck.

Without precognition, he'd have been dead. His adversary was stronger, quicker and had the momentum behind him. But when the blades whistled into position, Arvida had already moved, weaving away from the preordained pattern of the cutting edges. Shifting his weight expertly in the wake of the axehead, he pivoted out of contact and fired three rounds into his enemy's face at point-blank range. They detonated immediately, throwing both of them apart with the crack of the explosion.

Arvida checked his fall, springing back up, and prepared to fire again. He didn't need to. His enemy's face was ruined, a hollow shell of blood, armour-chips and skull-fragments.

For a moment, Arvida stood over the defeated warriors , feeling his pulse throb in his veins. It was the first time he'd got close to those who'd hunted his squad through the ruins.

As he looked at the livery on the shoulder-guards, his satisfaction at the kill was replaced by shock.

Then there were more sounds of pursuit, echoing in his future-sense like the memory of a dream. Other warriors were closing fast.

Arvida broke into a run, heading into cover past overhanging building-remnants and loping quickly towards the lander coordinates. There was no way he could fight to Kalliston's position alone, and he'd help no one by getting pointlessly killed. The only option was to gain the ship, take off and attempt an airlift recovery.

It was as he went, darting between shadows like a ghoul, that he tried to make sense of his attackers' identity.

But it made no sense. No sense whatsoever.

My questioner's armour, which I had thought was grey in the near-total dark, is a dirty white. The shoulder-guards were once a bright blue, though every exposed surface on his battle-plate is covered by a translucent layer of brown-red filth.

So he is a War Hound. Or, as I believe they've started calling themselves, a World Eater. The assumed name is ludicrous, a perversion of everything the Legiones Astartes used to stand for. However, to the extent that I understand the ways of other Legions, it is perfectly accurate. They do devour planets. I have heard tales of outrages under Angron's insane tutelage that make my stomach turn. The only Legion with a comparable reputation is the Wolves, so perhaps it's not surprising that I found it so easy to believe I was held by one of Russ's dogs.

In the dark, I had imagined my interrogator being something akin to a beast, slavering on the edge of madness. The reality is only a little less disconcerting. The World Eater's head is uncovered, exposing the full distortion of his features. His flesh is bronzed and supple, though there are deep wells of shadow under his low brow. He has long cheekbones and a blunt, slabbed chin. His head is shaved bare, the scalp puckered with scars. There are regular marks on his temples and a series of iron studs further up on the smooth skin. In another Legion, those studs might have indicated long service, but I know their purpose on him. As with all his kind, there are implants

under the flesh, implants long forbidden by the Emperor. The prohibition is for good reason. They accelerate the rage and stoke it, amplifying an already testosterone-charged kill-factory into a bringer of truly ludicrous levels of violence.

And there is something else. The Space Marine before me is no ordinary World Eater, if such a thing could even be said to exist. A few select members of that terror Legion have carved a name for themselves outside their closed, brooding brotherhood. This is one of them. I know, without needing to use my fractured mind-sight, that I am in the presence of Khârn, Captain of the Eighth Assault Company and equerry to the primarch. If I needed any confirmation that my death is close, I have it now.

He stares at me. His eyes are the yellow of curdled milk, rimmed with red where the lids are pulled back. Veins pulse at his temples, bulging darkly against taut skin. He has a line of drool still, glistening against his chin. If I ever wish to conjure up the image of a psychopath again, I will have this picture to bring to mind. Khârn is almost a parody of himself, the apotheosis of martial insanity, a walking furnace of unfettered bloodlust.

He was not always like this. Even in the stories I have heard, he was ferocious but not mad. Something has happened to change him. Something terrible.

'Why have you brought me here?' I ask.

Khârn smiles, but there is no mirth there. It is as if his facial muscles pull naturally into a leer unless continually suppressed.

'I am here for the same reason as you,' he says. 'Hunting through the wreckage, looking for something to salvage.'

Even in my weakened state, that image brings a choking, bitter laugh to my lips. I cannot imagine World Eaters salvaging anything. They are the soul of destruction and nothing else.

'And did you find what you were looking for?'

Khârn nods.

'There is a cavern, far below the surface of Tizca. You will know of it – the Reflecting Cave. We speculated that the Wolves might have missed it, despite their reputation for thoroughness. There was something down there I was ordered to retrieve.'

He withdraws an iron pendant from his armour. It is fashioned into the shape of a wolf's head howling against a crescent moon. The metal is black, as if placed in a fire for too long.

'The Moon Wolf,' says Khârn. 'Your primarch used it to make contact with Horus. It was a part of the Warmaster's armour once, and so has a sympathetic connection with him.'

He speaks as if those words should mean something to me, though I struggle to see the significance of them.

'It could be used again, and Horus has no wish to be reached for further discussions. It will be destroyed, and another potential chink in our defences will be closed off. Then, thank the gods, I shall be free to undertake more fulfilling work for the cause.'

'I do not understand,' I say, and the passing reference to *gods* makes me uneasy. 'What has Horus to do with this? What has happened here?'

Khârn doesn't smile this time, but I can sense a vicious amusement cradling in him. I sense more than that, too. He is burning with agony, an agony that can only be discharged by murder. The Moon Wolf was not the only reason he came to Prospero.

'You really know nothing,' he says. 'I had planned to torture you for your secrets, but I see that you have none. So I shall torture you another way.'

He leans forwards, and I recoil at the raw-meat stench of his breath.

'Listen to me, Thousand Son, and I will tell you a story. I will tell you of the great movement that is taking place across the galaxy. I will tell you of the ruin of all your primarch's hopes and the final triumph of the virtuous strong over the craven weak. And then, before I kill you, I will tell you of the final destination of this crusade, the crusade men are already beginning, in their infinite ignorance, to call the Heresy.'

The volume of fire was deafening. Bolter rounds exploded into the surrounding walls, shredding them into dust. Heavier weapons were being brought to bear, too. A missile screamed overhead, crashing into a stone balustrade less than five metres from Kalliston's position.

The Thousand Sons captain was hunkered down in an old blast crater somewhere deep in the centre of the city. Two of his squad were with him, crouched against the lip of the torn-up earth, their shoulders juddering as they loosed streams of shells into the night. The quantity of incoming fire was far greater than anything they could match, and the warm night air was streaked with tracer fire heading in their direction. A fourth body lay, immobile, at the bottom of the crater.

'Prepare to fall back,' announced Kalliston, watching his magazine empty. He was running out of choices. It was difficult to make out numbers in the dark and at such range, but there must have been more than thirty Space Marines closing in on them. Those numbers made holding ground impossible.

'Where to, brother-captain?' asked Leot, one of the two surviving Thousand Sons. There was no fear in his deliberate voice, but there was an undertone of reproach. He knew how slim the options were.

'To the lander,' replied Kalliston, ejecting the magazine and slamming home a replacement. 'But not direct. We'll break back towards the colonnade, and then cut round.'

He gauged the likely location of the closest enemy targets by the pattern of fire, threw himself onto the edge of the crater and let fly with a controlled salvo before dropping back again. As he landed out of harm's way, the thick crust of earth, glass and rubble exploded in a plume of fire. Then there were more bolt impacts, and the second whine of a missile launch.

'Now,' Kalliston ordered, beckoning his men to go ahead while he covered the retreat.

The two Space Marines fell back quickly, keeping in the lee of the crater shadow and moving to the far side of the bowl. As they reached the ridge, they broke out quickly. Kalliston stood up, releasing a final burst before racing to join them. He ran quickly up the uneven slope, feeling the thud of the incoming shells as they landed only metres short.

Then he was out, back onto the street level, running behind his battle-brothers, searching out fresh cover.

Too late, Kalliston realised that there were more attackers closing in from the very point they were heading towards.

'Incom–' he started, seeing the missile contrail too late.

The shoulder-launched missile slammed into the ground just ahead of him, throwing him into a roaring confusion of pain and tumbling movement. Kalliston felt several further heavy impacts, including one that exploded against his chest. His body cartwheeled through the air, buffeted by the backwash of the multiple blasts, before slamming into something unyielding. His spine compressed agonisingly, and he felt the bones of his right leg fracture. His vision went cloudy, and the world reeled around him in a blur of lurid colour.

Dimly, he heard treads rushing towards him in the dust, and the ragged bark of bolter-fire. A muzzle was pressed against his temple, clinking sharply against the smooth curve of his helm.

'No,' came a voice from close by, bestial in character and alive with a barely suppressed pleasure in the kill. 'Alive.'

Then agony surged through Kalliston's body, forking through his frame like storm-lightning. There was a numb falling away. Then there was nothing.

I had always considered it a gift to be able to peer inside the veils of a man's mind. I had always valued my ability to tell whether my interlocutor was lying or telling the truth, just as an ungifted mortal might make imperfect use of pulse-rates, sweating, or evasive gazes. Such a capability seemed to me one of the most precious of possessions, just one more piece of evidence for the ineluctable progress of mankind towards mortal godhood.

Now I recognise the price for such perspicuity. I cannot doubt the things I have been told. I cannot reassure myself that Khârn is concealing the truth from me, because his mind is like a translucent vial and there is no concealment possible.

So I must believe. I must believe what he says about the ruin of the Great Crusade and the turning of the primarchs to darkness, and the gathering storm that even now extends its pinions towards Terra. I must believe that my gene-father, whom I had revered along with the rest of my brothers, was guilty of the most terrible miscalculation, and has passed beyond the confines of the physical universe with the remnants of our Legion. I must believe that my survival is a pointless thing, a piece of unresolved business from a war that I have been denied any meaningful part in.

As he speaks, my recovery accelerates, and my ability to make use of my powers returns more quickly. My body embarks on the astonishing process of repair that it has been able to conduct ever since the implant of my enhanced organs. I am preparing to extend my life again, to resist whatever fresh assault comes my way.

That is what I have been turned into, a vehicle for survival. Even in the face of such overwhelming trauma, my blood still clots, my sinews pull back into shape and my bones repair the cracks in their structure. By telling me these things, in such agonising detail, he has given me the space to become myself again. I have weapons. I have the ability to hurt him, perhaps even the ability to kill him. Does he know this? Is my degradation so complete that he no longer sees me as any kind of threat?

He may be right. My spirit, my certainty is gone. The actions of Magnus are either incomprehensible or evil. In either case, I cannot focus my thoughts on anything but the betrayal.

Why did he send us away? He must have known we'd seek to return, or that the vengeful forces that destroyed this world would come after us in the void. He was the mightiest of us all, the *magus*, the one who saw the snaking paths of the Ocean most clearly of all. So I cannot put it down to simple omission. There are patterns here to be read. There are always patterns.

'So, Thousand Son,' asks my tormentor. 'What do you make of that?'

He delights in my misery. It draws his attention from his own discontent. It is a cliché as old as the universe, the bully inflicting pain in order to send it away from himself.

It won't work. The pain will catch up with him in the end, even if he has to kill every other sentient life-form in the galaxy first.

'You allied yourself with the traitor,' I say, and I hear the hollow ring to my words.

'You call him traitor. History will call him redeemer.'

'And you tell me the Wolves of Fenris did this to punish our treachery. Then why do you hunt us?'

'They came for you because they believed you had turned. We come for you because we know that you didn't. Not truly. Not reliably. Our cause demands commitment.'

'So you never did believe in Unification? It was always a sham for you?'

Khârn grimaces. He is like a child, and his emotions play across his face nakedly. My mind-sight is overkill here – the rawest practicus could read him now.

'We believed in it completely,' he growls, and the raw emotion rises to just below the surface. 'None believed in it more than we did. None laid their bodies on the line to the extent that we did.'

He comes closer. His eyes stare at me, glistening in the bright light.

'We are fighters,' he says. 'We are made in the image of our primarch, just as you are made in the image of yours, and he has been betrayed and cast aside, even as the rule of the galaxy passes from the warriors to the slavemasters.'

I do not understand the reference to slavemasters, but it scarcely matters, for Khârn is no longer talking to me.

‘They will use us again to fight their battles while they remain in the audience, laughing. They are the audience, who watch as we come for them in their stalls. We will do to them what Angron should have done in Desh’ea. We will fulfill the potential within us.’

I see his pupils flicker, and can only guess at what scenes he is seeing. Like a prophet trapped in his own visions, Khârn is locked in a world of unreliable memory and paranoia. The damage done to his mind is heartbreaking. All that energy, all that raw potency, has been harnessed to an engine of lunacy.

Enough. It is time to show him how much I understand.

‘You didn’t come here for the Moon Wolf,’ I say, keeping my voice quiet. ‘You came here because you knew what devices once existed on Prospero. You hoped to find a cure.’

That halts him. He glares at me, and a fleck of spittle shines on his hanging lip like a jewel.

‘There is still time,’ I say, knowing the danger it places me in. I begin to wonder if this encounter was foreseen after all. ‘The devices have all been destroyed, but I can replicate their functions. I can heal your mind. I can remove the implants and give you back your sleep. I can take away the fire that drives you onwards, the fire that goads you to the acts you abhor. Even now, I know that a part of you still abhors what you have done.’

The spittle hangs, trembling, on his unmoving flesh.

‘I can help you, brother. I can heal your mind.’

He remains locked, frozen in indecision. If I had been Corvidae, I could have seen the paths of the future bisect within him, one going left, one going right. He is at the juncture now, what the ancients called *crisis*. He has the power to choose, to pull back or to plough on. I cannot intervene. The slightest nudge now will unleash the inferno, one that would toss me aside like dried brush in the hurricane.

I dare to believe in him for the space of a heartbeat. He looks at me, and I see the vindication of my guesses. He is lost in a universe of pain, one that is only temporarily forgotten in the action of killing. I know that my words have reached the sliver of his old self that still endures. I know he can hear me.

And so we remain, alone, locked away somewhere in the ruins of Prospero, a tiny mirror of the battle of wills taking place all across the galaxy.

And for that single heartbeat, I dare to believe.

‘Witch!’ he roars then, and the spittle flies from his lips. ‘*You* cannot heal this!’

Like a prey-beast springing away from the spear, he drags up a cry of tortured rage, shaking his head from side to side, flailing sweat from the bronze skin. He balls his massive fists, and I know they will come for me soon. His face contorts into a vice of bitter anguish, the expression that it will surely wear for millennia hence if I cannot stop him now.

He has chosen.

I cry aloud words of power, words I had forgotten existed until this moment. I am weak, crippled by the rigours of my captivity, but the lessons of my long conditioning are strong.

I am Athanaean, a master of the hidden ways of the mind, and there are more weapons in the galaxy than fists and blades.

My bonds shatter, freeing me to move. I rise from the chair, wreathed in the blazing light of the unbound aether, ignoring the protests of my broken limbs.

He comes at me then, the Eater of Worlds, and there is murder in his red-rimmed eyes. I have hurt him by exposing the source of his anguish, and I know then he will not stop until I lie dead and my blood paints every wall of this cell.

But we are on my world, the wellspring of my Legion’s ancient power, and the very dust of Tizca fuels my mastery of the warp. I am more powerful than he guesses.

He howls, this ruined abomination, as he thunders into strike-range. I meet the challenge, and my conscience is clear.

I cannot cure him, so I will have to kill him.

Arvida arrived at the landing site just in time.

Just in time to see the corpses of the pilots being dragged across the ground, leaving furrows in the sharp-edged dust. Just in time to see the krak-charges being laid around the flanks of the lander. Just in time to hear the rasping laughter of victory from the berserkers who’d stormed the vehicle.

There were twenty-seven World Eaters clustered around the empty crew-bay. One of them lay in the dust, his armour punched open from bolter impacts. The only other casualties were the two Thousand Sons who’d been left to guard it. They hadn’t stood much of a chance.

Arvida ducked down, keeping hidden behind a tangled hedge of semi-melted girders thirty metres away. As he watched, the helms of his brothers were torn off. Their exposed faces were punched, over and over again. The heads lolled lifelessly, turning into raw lumps of gore and gristle under the pointless barrage. The World Eaters laughed some more, cheering as each fist hit home.

Arvida turned away. He felt angry enough, but not towards Angron’s warriors – they were just savages, and had long ago ceased to be capable of anything more than boneheaded thuggery. His real anger was directed towards Kalliston, the one who had led them here against his counsel. The captain had always had too much faith in the providence of fate. The very idea that Magnus might have been fallible, that the primarch’s leadership might have been badly misguided, was anathema to him. Clearly it had been. They should have remained in space, searching for more survivors before heading into the emptiness of the void to recover. Prospero was nothing but a graveyard.

Even so, that left much to be explained. Arvida might have understood if there had been Wolves on Prospero, but World Eaters were another matter. Had the two Legions been acting in concert? Had all the other Legions turned against the Thousand Sons? If so, then why now? And for what reason?

The World Eaters began to strip the rest of the armour from their captives, and the desecration of their bodies began in earnest. Whoops and roars filled the otherwise tranquil air as they set to work.

Arvida glanced at his helm display. His squad were all gone, their life-signs inactive. He was alone, facing an enemy he couldn't hope to contest.

The safest course of action would be to retreat, to flee back through the silent streets and wait for something to turn up. He knew he would have to withdraw soon enough, but the senseless barbarism in front of him offended his highly-developed sense of pride in the rules of war. His Legion had never broken them.

He rose from cover and drew his bolter up in a single, flowing movement. As he took aim, he saw the path of the shell that he would fire snaking into the future, and took some solace from the certainty of the kill. He squeezed the trigger, then turned and sprinted back into the shadows.

Arvida didn't see the captain of the World Eaters collapse to the ground, his helm carved in two by the detonation of the bolt-round, but he heard it. Then he heard the roars of anger, and the thud of four dozen boots as the warband wheeled and charged towards the source of the shot.

He ran, keeping his head low, ducking and weaving through the thickets of blasted iron. The noise of the pursuit echoed in his ears, harsh and brutal. If they caught him, he'd be lucky to suffer a quick death.

Arvida upped the pace, pushing his body into a new burst of speed, barely noticing the skeletal buildings rush past in the night. He knew it had been reckless to fire that shot. Stupid, even.

But, and just for a moment, it had felt good.

His strength is breathtaking. It is as if every aspect of the Legiones Astartes has been stripped away in favour of that single facet. His fists move in blurs of speed, backed up by the prodigious power of his massive body. He has no weapon, but that scarcely seems to matter. He is used to carving up his foes with his hands.

He is always attacking, always looking for the way in. I parry as best I can, holding him back by attacking his only vulnerable part. I see his mind now as it will become in the future – a cauldron of seething, perpetual violence. The brief window I had on another Khârn has closed, and the corrupted half is all that remains. I can hammer away at that, flexing my telepathic muscles as he flexes his unnaturally stimmed physical ones, though I fear my attacks have little bite.

He wades through warp-born attacks that would floor a lesser adversary. I know I must be hurting him, but he brushes it off. Perhaps there is no pain I could inflict that is greater than the one he inflicts on himself.

'Witch!' he roars again, coming at me in a barrelling, swaying charge.

I leap to the side, crashing against the metal walls of the cell, only evading his outstretched hands by finger-widths. I unleash everything I have then, a whirling torrent of memory-scorching agony capable of ripping the sanity from a man and dissolving it like magnesium in water.

But there is so little sanity to rip away, and he barely stumbles.

I make use of the gap I created, and throw a heavy punch at his exposed head. My fist connects. It is a well-aimed blow, and impacts with all the force I can deliver. His skull rocks back and blood joins the trails of saliva in the air.

Then I am moving again, evading the furious response. He is like a whirlwind, a morass of hurtling limbs. I feel a heavy thud as his boot rises, catching me on my hip. There is a jarring crack as my pelvis fractures.

I scramble away from him, sprawling face-down to the floor. Another foot connects, breaking the femur in my trailing leg. Out of my armour, I have so little defence against attacks of this quantity and magnitude. The absurdity of my defiance is laughable.

I roll over onto my back, spinning away from a floor-breaking fist-plunge.

Khârn towers over me. Froth spills from his lips, and his eyes bulge from their swollen sockets.

It is my pity that has doomed me. Pity is the only emotion he can no longer tolerate, the one that reminds him of what he once was. If I had not offered to cure him, perhaps I would have lived. Perhaps he would have persuaded me of the righteousness of his cause, and I would have joined the movement that he says will liberate the galaxy.

It is that thought that persuades me I was right to try. As I gaze up into the mask of trembling fervour above me, I see what fate would have awaited me as a part of that dark crusade. He has lost himself, and what remains is now much less than human.

His clenched gauntlet swoops down, hitting me square in the face. The bones, already weakened, crunch inwards. I feel the back of my head drive a dent into the metal floor, and the hot stickiness of the blood in the well as it rebounds out again.

The world tilts, rocking on an axis of nausea. I only dimly feel the second blow, cracking into my ribs. My body becomes a chorus of pain, resounding in discordant polyphony.

Through blood-swelled eyes I see the fist coming that will finish me. It is fitting, to witness the cause of my own death. As a loyal son of the Imperium, I never wished for more than that.

I have time for only one more thought before the end comes.

I gave you the choice, Khârn. When the murder and madness are over, you will have the leisure to reflect on that. You could

have turned back.

That knowledge, I know, will haunt him. I dread to think what he will become when his rampage ends and he is forced to confront that.

I can guess. I guess that he will become uncontainable, and will turn on whatever force has sought to channel his rage for its own purposes. None shall master him, for he has lost mastery over himself.

When the fist lands, that is what I am thinking. There is no comfort in it. And, of course, there will be no comfort in anything again.

Arvida kept moving. The dead city was crawling with World Eater kill-squads, roving through the empty hab-blocks like underhive murder-gangs. For the time being, he was ahead of them. He knew Tizca better than them, and remembered the intricate pattern of its streets perfectly. What was more, his future-sense still lingered, warning him away from taking wrong turns and preventing fatal mis-steps.

It wouldn't last forever. Sooner or later, he'd have to rest, to sleep, to find something to eat. His enhanced constitution could stave off that need for days, but not forever. The Wolves had burned Prospero almost completely to the ground, so there would be meagre hunting ahead.

His only chance of survival would be to stay in the city, evading the predators and searching for some kind of transport off-world. He assumed the *Geometric* was still in orbit, though his attempts to send a signal had failed. The ship was not without its defences, though it would struggle against a well-crewed World Eaters warship.

So. The options were limited, and the odds long.

Kalliston had been a fool. Coming back to Prospero had been a predictable error, one caused by excessive faith in the primarch. Arvida had never shared that faith, not even when the Legion had been intact. Whatever cataclysm had occurred here had been beyond Magnus's power to prevent, so it was folly to retain faith in his stratagems. Any survivors from the sack of Prospero were alone now, a scattered band of warriors cast adrift on the rip-tide of the galaxy like the spars of a ruined galleon.

Arvida had no idea how many of his brothers still lived. Perhaps there were hundreds. Perhaps he was the only one.

He reached the end of a long, shallow climb away from the mass of the central conurbation. Arvida turned then, looking back the way he'd come. He had a view far across the centre of the city. Under the starlight, the fields of glass glittered with a pearlescent sheen. It was beautiful.

The City of Light.

He paused for a moment, lost in the vision of what had once been. Nothing moved. Even the drifting clouds of smog were still, suspended in a rare moment of calm.

Only one certainty remained. Arvida knew, as only a Corvidae could know, that death would not find him on Prospero. That was no consolation for what had been lost, but at least it lent the task of planning his next move a certain urgency.

He would survive. He would discover the true causes of his Legion's destruction, and live to fight them. He would neither pause nor stumble until everything had been revealed to him, everything that would give him a weapon to employ.

'Knowledge is power,' he breathed.

Then he turned away from the scene, and stole quickly back into the occlusion of the ruins. As he went, the dim red light of the angry magma fires caught on his shoulder-guard, exposing the serpentine star set about the black raven-head of his cult discipline.

Then he was gone, a shadow among shadows.

The Face of Treachery

Gav Thorpe

Artificial eyes scoured the firmament, seeking a telltale reflection of radiation, looking for a pinprick of light, searching for the merest hint of heat in the coldness. The enemy were out here somewhere, lurking in the shadow of Isstvan VI's rings. Ice and dust particles provided ample cover for a starship, a hindrance compounded by the residual plasma clouds and radiation from the battle just fought.

Six vessels prowled the void. At their head was the battle-barge *Dedicated Wrath*, its flotilla of two strike cruisers, one grand cruiser and two destroyers spread across hundreds of thousands of kilometres of space. They approached Isstvan VI warily, unsure how many of the enemy had escaped the initial battle. Plasma reactors on idle, they drifted out-system by inertia; what power they were expending directed to the banks of scanner antenna jutting from their prows.

On the bridge of the *Dedicated Wrath* Lieutenant-Commander Nigh Vash Delerax fixed his stare on the main screen. The huge display dominated the wall of the main bridge, covered with an anarchic maze of surveyor data and scanner sweep returns. Isstvan VI loomed large in the display, its gold and blue rings shimmering coldly in the faint light of the system's star.

'*Industrious* reports possible scanner return in quadrant eight-theta,' reported one of the aides at the scanning console behind the Legiones Astartes commander. He was non-Legiones Astartes, though his body showed signs of augmetic surgery and his left eye was a bionic replacement that twinkled red in the bright glow of his screen. 'Too big to be an asteroid, though possibly an uncharted moonlet.'

Delerax moved his gaze to the top of the screen, to the area mentioned. It was pointless, he realised; even his augmented eyes would not spot something before the systems of the battle-barge, especially since the visual display he looked at was itself a construct based on that data. If the *Dedicated Wrath* could not see the enemy, neither could he.

'Tell *Industrious* to close to within fifty thousand kilometres of the source,' said Delerax, pulling his eyes away from the screen. 'Move *Justified Aggressor* to a triangulating point.'

'Affirmative, lieutenant-commander,' said the aide.

The thought that he might have found his prey sent a buzz of excitement through Delerax. He had spent many days fruitlessly searching the outer reaches of the Isstvan system and had almost come to believe that the enemy were not here at all.

His pre-cortical implant responded to his change of mood. With the tiniest of vibrations, the device triggered a wave of chemicals through Delerax's brain. Immediately every sense was heightened. He could smell the sweat of the men at the consoles, the oil from the machinery. He could taste the static from the display screens and feel the soft currents of air from the overhead ventilators. The blue and white of his armour seemed brighter and every hiss, bleep and breath across the bridge echoed in his ears.

'*Industrious* confirms contact,' the aide said excitedly. 'Positive transmission identification. It's a Salamanders ship, strike vessel classification.'

'At last!' Delerax let out his pent-up frustration with a shout. He turned and stomped across the bridge towards the communications desk. 'Signal the whole flotilla. Manoeuvre for immediate attack. Transmit the following to the enemy: This is Lieutenant-Commander Delerax of the World Eaters. Stand down your weapons and prepare to be boarded. Non-compliance will result in your destruction. You will receive no further warning.'

'They're making a run for it,' the scanning officer called out. 'Cutting away from Isstvan VI, gaining speed.'

'Flotilla move to intercept,' said Delerax. 'Target engines at earliest opportunity. If they get away, you will answer to me!'

The World Eater's implant was in full battle-mode now, sending jolts through his adrenal system, gearing up his whole body for the coming fight. The sensation was a curious blend of clarity and euphoria: a general sense of well-being that pleasantly dulled the lieutenant-commander's thoughts while his instinctual reactions raced away, filling him with a barrage of sensation.

As the World Eaters flotilla powered up their engines the Salamanders cruiser turned out-system and darted for its next patch of cover – a cloud of asteroids some five hundred thousand kilometres from Isstvan VI. Like a pack of hounds the ships of the World Eaters gave chase, the more powerful engines of the *Dedicated Wrath* pushing the battle-barge to the front of the pursuit.

'Prepare warp torpedoes, maximum spread,' Delerax ordered as the *Dedicated Wrath* continued to close the range. If the strike cruiser was allowed to gain the sanctuary of the asteroid field the less manoeuvrable battle-barge would likely lose its prey; this was a kill that Delerax wanted for himself.

The Salamanders were still several thousand kilometres from safety when the gunnery captain reported that they were now within maximum torpedo range. Delerax held off the order to fire, judging the distance to be too great. He paced back and forth across the bridge, impatiently waiting for the moment to fire when the torpedoes would give the enemy the least time to react but catch the strike cruiser before it reached the asteroid field.

He listened to the range being counted down by one of the aides and occasionally glanced across to the main screen. The strike cruiser's position was highlighted by a glowing reticule but the ship itself was still too distant to be seen, even with full magnification.

'Our guest wishes to be updated on the current situation.'

Delerax turned to see his second-in-command, Captain Althix Kordassis, had entered the bridge. His blue-and-white armour was trimmed with gold, his right arm a mechanical prosthetic clad with plates painted to match his powered suit. Most remarkable was the look of disdain on his face as he spoke of the Warmaster's representative.

'He can monitor the comm-feed like everybody else,' growled Delerax. 'I'm busy.'

'He wants a personal report,' Kordassis said with a look of apology.

'He won't get one,' snapped Delerax. With combat stimms flowing through his body he was in no mood for the petty requests of Horus's ambassador. The thought of even looking at the Space Marine envoy that had been forced upon him made Delerax quiver with anger.

'What shall I tell him?' asked Kordassis.

'Whatever you like,' replied Delerax, turning back to the main screen. 'This is none of his business.'

Kordassis waited a few moments longer before realising he would get nothing else from his commander.

'I might as well stay here and watch the excitement then,' said the captain.

'You're welcome,' said Delerax. 'Man the weapons station.'

When the range had closed to the optimum opportunity, Delerax gave the order to loose a full torpedo salvo. The battle-barge shuddered as the gigantic missiles were launched. They appeared instantly on the screen, four flares of yellow plasma against the stars that suddenly winked out of existence as their warp drives engaged.

Skipping in and out of warp space, the torpedoes left a trail of multicoloured flashes in their wake, describing an arc that slowly curved to the right as the Salamanders craft tried to evade them. Then they were out of sight, reduced to warp-echo registers on the scanners.

'Twelve thousand kilometres to target,' reported a weapons officer, reading from a glowing green screen. He was Skanda Vior, a World Eater too, and like Delerax and Kordassis was clad for battle in his armour. Unlike the officers, he had painted much of his armour red, a growing trend amongst the Legion; an acknowledgement of Angron's warrior cult. Vior waited a few seconds.

'Eleven thousand kilometres to target.'

The countdown continued and Delerax ceased his pacing at seven thousand kilometres.

'Six thousand kilometres to target,' said the weapons officer. 'Switching to onboard data scanners; preparing for spread.'

A sub-screen flickered into life on the main viewer, showing an aggregate view from the torpedoes, rendered in a stark black and red monochrome. Strange shapes whirled and Delerax realised they must have switched view while the torpedoes were in mid-jump. A moment later they rematerialised in the real universe and the strike cruiser flashed into view.

It was long and thin, with a launch bay built on its dorsal superstructure. Pinpricks of plasma erupted like sparks from the flight deck as the Salamanders launched attack craft to intercept the incoming torpedoes.

'Five thousand kilometres, spread launch,' announced the officer.

The torpedo-generated image swirled into static for a few seconds as the missiles separated, each disgorging four hundred warheads at the Salamanders cruiser. When the relay returned the view was filled with a cloud of sixteen hundred glimmering projectiles. Explosions blotted out the stars as the Salamanders craft swooped and climbed and rolled through the mass, blasting away with cannons and lasers. As the warhead launchers continued to power towards the strike cruiser – each containing a five megatonne nuclear charge – the defence turrets of the Salamanders vessel opened up. Ripples of plasma blasts and flashes of high-velocity munitions streaked across the view, detonating even more of the warheads.

The torpedoes were close enough now to relay a direct-image. The construct-based picture was replaced by a near real-time view of the strike cruiser. It was dark green and banded with broad irregular stripes of yellow, the badge of the Legion visible against a huge white circle near its prow. Through the haze of detonations, it turned away, the captain trying to narrow the ship's profile against the swarm of incoming warheads. Plasma engines shone like stars through the fog of explosions, distorted by a shimmer of energy fields.

'Fool,' said Delerax, smiling at the weapons officer. 'A rudimentary mistake. One should turn into a torpedo attack, protecting the engines. A novice, no doubt.'

Blue and purple lightning flickered as the remaining warheads, several hundred of them, slammed into the strike cruiser's shields. The vessel was engulfed by a blaze of detonations, so bright it appeared on the main display like a nova being born. More explosions followed as the shields overloaded and the remaining warheads struck the cruiser's armoured hull. Plasma billowed from a ruptured engine duct.

A moment later the mini-screen vanished as the warhead launchers detonated.

'Scanners confirm severe engine damage and moderate damage to the starboard gunnery decks.'

'Signal the flotilla, close in for the kill,' replied Delerax.

'Receiving transmission from Legion command,' declared a communications aide. 'Strapped with a priority subsignal.'

'On speakers,' replied Delerax, not moving his eyes from the screen.

The bridge hissed with static and a series of coded beeps and buzzes sounded before a bass voice broke across the noise. Delerax's attention was immediately fixed on the message, all other considerations forgotten as he recognised the voice of Angron, the World Eaters primarch.

'The treacherous sons of Corax continue to elude that lumbering engineer, Perturabo. The Warmaster has seen fit to give me free hand at the hunt and I will bring down the scum of Deliverance within days. All ships are to return to orbit to conduct the search. To me, my savage hounds! We shall let loose our fury upon the Raven Guard and wipe them from history. Obey with immediate effect.'

'Shall we break away?' asked Kordassis.

‘No,’ replied Delerax. He looked at the strike cruiser limping towards the asteroid field followed by a trail of expanding plasma: a predator seeing its prey wounded and ready for the kill. ‘Let the others chase the Raven Guard back and forth across the mountains. A few more hours will make no difference. I have a Salamander to slay.’

Branne frowned and looked at the scanner report again. It did not make any more sense on the second reading. He turned to his companion, the Imperial Army praefector, Marcus Valerius.

‘A large residual trace of plasma and radiation, plus scattered debris clouds,’ said the Raven Guard commander.

‘A space battle?’ asked the praefector.

‘A large one,’ replied Branne. ‘Too large.’

‘What do you mean?’ asked Valerius.

Branne handed him the report and walked over to the men working the scanner console, his armour’s heavy boots muffled by the thick carpet laid over the decking. ‘Have these readings been confirmed by the rest of the fleet?’

‘Yes, commander,’ replied the chief officer. ‘Within standard parameters, all sensor returns are showing the same across the fleet.’

‘What do you mean by “too large”?’ said Valerius.

‘Dozens of destroyed ships,’ said Branne. ‘More ships than the entirety of the Luna Wolves fleet.’

‘Imperial Army vessels turned by the Warmaster, perhaps,’ suggested the officer. ‘Oh, and were they not renamed the Sons of Horus?’

The praefector toyed with the red sash across his chest, a symbol of his family’s nobility. It showed signs of wear from Valerius’s constant fidgeting during the long warp jump from Deliverance to Isstvan. The praefector’s nervousness was understandable, though it irritated Branne considerably. Valerius had persuaded the Raven Guard commander to abandon his role as garrison leader of the Ravenspire to come to Isstvan and had vouched for the act with his life. Branne was more than willing to exact the price offered if the trap he suspected proved to be true.

‘Even so, it would indicate almost total destruction of the involved fleet,’ said Branne, ignoring the praefector’s correction. ‘That many destroyed ships indicate a much larger battle.’

‘How do we proceed?’ asked Valerius.

Branne considered his options. His fleet, composed of three Raven Guard vessels including his battle-barge and a handful of Imperial Army transports and frigates, had entered Isstvan perpendicular to the orbital plane. He studied the schematic display of the fleet’s position on a monitor; a projected course drew a dotted line around the Isstvan star towards the planets currently on the other side of the system.

‘Activate sensor dampening protocols,’ said the commander. ‘Rig reflex shields for silent approach. We’ll come in across the star to mask our signature. I don’t want to be seen.’

‘What about my vessels?’ asked Valerius. ‘We don’t have that capability.’

‘Get them to run as quiet as possible,’ said Branne. ‘Until we find out what has happened, I don’t want anyone else to know we are here.’

‘Quiet running will slow us down,’ said Valerius. He blinked rapidly, another nervous tic he had developed. ‘What if we are being too cautious and arrive late?’

‘Late for what?’ rasped Branne, out of patience with the praefactor’s constant hectoring. ‘The battle’s already happened, Marcus. Whatever occurred here is over.’

Five days closer to Isstvan V, where the majority of the fighting appeared to have taken place, Branne was in his quarters when he was passed word that the ship was receiving a transmission from Valerius’s flagship.

‘Send it through to my personal comm,’ said Branne, putting aside the data-slate of sensor readings he had been studying. The reports all confirmed the initial survey. A space battle, or rather several battles in a short period of time involving nearly a hundred vessels, had raged around Isstvan V and out-system towards Isstvan VI.

‘Commander Branne, we have picked up a signature code.’ Valerius’s voice sounded reedy and weak over the hissing comm-link. ‘It’s an Iron Hands identification transmission. A ship identifying itself as the *Glory of Victory*. It’s automated. Trying to track the signal for reply.’

‘Negative,’ snapped Branne. ‘Do not open transmission. Do you want everybody in the Isstvan system to know we are here?’

‘My apologies, commander,’ said Valerius. ‘However, a narrow-beam signal would be very hard to detect. Perhaps those on the Iron Hands ship can tell us what happened here.’

‘Negative,’ Branne said again. ‘Continue to monitor for other transmissions.’

‘But what if they need our help?’ said Valerius.

‘We can’t trust them,’ said Branne.

‘I don’t understand, commander,’ said the praefector. ‘We can’t trust the Iron Hands?’

‘My technicians have been analysing the readings from the battles,’ Branne explained. ‘It’s hard to be certain, but it seems that the fleet sent to deal with Horus split and fighting broke out. I fear it is not just the Luna Wolves that have turned against us. Until we know for sure who is loyal, we have to suspect everybody.’

Static filled the room as Valerius absorbed this revelation. Eventually the officer spoke again, his voice a barely-heard whisper in the hiss.

'But if that is true, what of the Raven Guard?' he said.

'Your dreams may have had something to them after all, Marcus,' said Branne.

'So now we set full speed?'

'No, not yet.' Branne took a deep breath, only now consciously acknowledging a doubt that had nagged him since he had first begun to suspect the extent of the treachery at Isstvan. 'We have to be careful. We may be the last survivors of the Raven Guard.'

Three days out from orbit of Isstvan V, Branne's fleet ghosted in on minimal power, every spare watt of energy from the reactors diverted to the sensor arrays and communications systems, seeking answers to horrifying questions. The evidence was overwhelming: Horus had allies from within the fleet sent to bring him to order.

Branne spent most of his time on the bridge of his battle-barge, the *Avenger*. For the last two days he had hosted Valerius on board, to ensure that the praefector was within easy reach if things went amiss. The Imperial Army officer sat beside the communications console gnawing at a worn nail, cheeks sunken, his usually smooth skin dark with stubble. He stared at the screens with haunted, bloodshot eyes rimmed with darkness and Branne guessed that the nightmares still plagued the officer, though he had not mentioned them again since they had set out from Deliverance.

'Picking up some garbled comm traffic,' one of the attendants reported. Valerius sat bolt upright, turning on the bench to Branne. 'World Eaters protocols. Trying to crack them now, commander.'

'Who are they signalling?' asked Branne.

'General Legion broadcast, commander,' the aide replied. 'Also picking up registers of Word Bearers and Emperor's Children signals. They seem to be communicating with the Sons of Horus.'

Valerius seemed to become even paler, if that was possible. He met Branne's narrowed gaze with a wild look.

'The World Eaters, Emperor's Children and Word Bearers?' he said. 'All of them turned?'

Branne said nothing, finding such a treachery impossible to comprehend. He tried to think of some other explanation for what they had discovered but could not escape the truth. This was no simple rebellion; this was the birth of civil war.

He sat in his command throne, armour servos creaking and whining as his fingers tightened on the arms. Head bowed, he tried to clear his thoughts, to come up with a plan of action. What had happened made no sense and his mind kept coming back to an unanswered question.

'What of the primarch and the Legion?' he asked quietly.

'No Raven Guard transmission detected, commander,' said the communications orderly. 'We've scanned all Legion frequencies and beyond, but no recognisable signatures detected.'

Branne sighed. His earlier fears had come true, and Valerius's dire predictions also. The Raven Guard were no more.

'Signal the fleet to prepare for new course orders,' he said.

'What?' Valerius was on his feet. 'Change course for where?'

'Out of here,' said Branne. 'We're too late.'

'There may be survivors,' said Valerius. He opened his hands imploringly towards the commander. 'We have to at least get closer to find out the truth.'

'That can come later,' said Branne. 'Our immediate task is to elude detection and leave the system in one piece. After that we can work out what happened.'

'Commander, we are picking up a broad-beam transmission from the surface of Isstvan V,' said the comms officer.

'Directed to us?' said Branne, taken aback.

'No, commander, it is a general broadcast. Minimal encryption. You should hear this.'

'Very well,' said Branne, leaning back in his command throne.

The voice that boomed from the speakers was edged with madness, every syllable spat like a curse.

'...nd then we shall crush the misguided sons of Corax completely. They think they can evade us forever? They are wrong! I will hunt down Corax and break him myself. The Raven Guard have nowhere left to run. In two days our victory will be complete and the last survivors will be crushed by the World Eaters. Blood demands victory, and we shall let it flow!'

'That can only be Angron,' said Branne when the transmission was cut. On the one hand, he was elated that Corax and the Legion still survived; on the other, it seemed that survival would not last much longer. 'Can you source that transmission?' he demanded, standing up.

'Better, commander,' replied the technician. 'There are planetary coordinates attached to the signal, indicating where the World Eaters plan to attack, calling for orbital support.'

Pushing aside his doubts and confusion, Branne set his mind in motion. A strategy immediately sprang to mind, but it was risky. He reconsidered, analysing his options, but was drawn to the same conclusion. A third evaluation did not suggest any alternatives.

'Marcus, I need you to signal your fleet,' Branne announced. 'Tell them to make full speed for Isstvan IV.'

'Isstvan IV? Not Isstvan V? And won't full speed make us instantly visible on every scanner within range?'

'That is my intent,' said Branne.

‘A decoy.’ Valerius spoke flatly, as if his last shred of emotion had been drained from him. ‘You want to use my ships and men as decoys.’

Branne nodded and said nothing. Valerius closed his eyes and pinched his nose, as if he had a headache. He nodded to himself, jaw clenched.

‘Very well,’ said the praefector, opening his eyes to stare at the Raven Guard commander with resignation. ‘I shall return to my flagship and make the preparations.’

‘No, you will continue to serve here,’ said Branne. ‘As we agreed, you do not leave my side.’

‘You still do not trust me?’ The praefector sighed heavily. ‘What more proof do you need?’

‘When the primarch is safe and our brothers aboard, I might trust you then,’ said Branne. ‘Until that time, you stay here.’

‘You plan an evacuation under fire,’ said Valerius. ‘I’ll have my transports send over as many shuttles and drop-ships as your flight bays can hold.’

‘That would be good,’ said Branne. ‘Let us hope that we need that many.’

With a growl, Delerax jabbed a finger onto the transmission key.

‘I do not care what problems you are having,’ he snarled. ‘Run the reactors at one hundred and twenty per cent.’

‘We risk plasmic extrapolation, lieutenant-commander,’ the engineer replied. ‘It could shut down the whole system.’

‘The greatest battle in the World Eaters’ history is about to take place on Isstvan V,’ said the lieutenant-commander. ‘Do you think I want to arrive late for that? You have your orders, I expect them to be obeyed.’

Delerax cut off the response and whirled towards the navigation officers.

‘And you!’ he snapped. ‘I want to hear no more about gravity wells and safe distances. Get me to Isstvan V by the shortest route. No excuses!’

The helmsman nodded nervously and turned his gaze back to the controls. Delerax continued to stalk the bridge, seeking any way to get to the battle even faster. Angron was due to initiate his final assault on the Raven Guard in six hours and Delerax was determined that he would be there to take part. Already the rest of the flotilla had been left half a day behind, unable to keep up with the battle-barge’s superior power. The *Dedicated Wrath* would be on hand to rain down fire on the remnants of Corax’s Legion, whatever it took. If all went well, Delerax would be able to join in the fighting directly. Drop-pods were being prepared for a combat launch.

The World Eater smiled at the thought of butchering some Raven Guard. Kordassis noticed his commander’s expression and joined him beside his chair.

‘We will have our chance this time,’ said the captain. ‘The slight against us at the dropsite will be expunged.’

‘Did you not hear the Warmaster’s words?’ Delerax replied quietly, a sneer twisting his lips. ‘To take part in the fleet battle was a great honour, essential to our victory.’

‘It was an insult,’ said Kordassis. ‘The primarch saw it for what it was and did the right thing. To simply obliterate a foe from afar lacks glory. What honour is there when one cannot see the life fade from the eyes of a fallen enemy or smell the blood spilling from his wounds?’

‘None,’ agreed Delerax. His implant buzzed in response to his mood, sending a jolt through his thoughts. ‘The cowards of the Raven Guard will be shown the true face of war.’

‘And what of the Warmaster’s ambassador?’ whispered Kordassis. ‘What if he chooses to interfere again?’

‘He is but a single warrior,’ said Delerax. ‘He is no longer relevant.’

‘I understand,’ said Kordassis. ‘Do you want me to deal with him now?’

The thought entertained Delerax, a murderous impulse stimulated by his implant. He quivered as he pictured Horus’s representative lying mangled at his feet but fought through the urge to kill.

‘No,’ he told Kordassis. ‘There is no reason to risk the Warmaster’s displeasure, as satisfying as it might be. Just be ready should I need you.’

‘I’ll be ready,’ said Kordassis with a grin. ‘Have no worry about that.’

Delerax checked the chronometer again. Four hours until the assault began. He was pleased, knowing that he would reach orbit in time to take part. The drop-pods were prepared for immediate launch, his twenty-strong bodyguard ready for the attack.

The lieutenant-commander sat in his chair trying to remain composed. It was a hard task; visions of what he would do to the Raven Guard kept flickering through his thoughts. His implant responded again and again, rewarding his thoughts of killing with surges of chemical stimulants.

‘Receiving word from Legion command,’ announced Kordassis. He gave an angry growl as he read the message. ‘An enemy fleet has been detected in the vicinity of Isstvan IV, lieutenant-commander. The fleet is being ordered to depart and engage them.’

‘Depart?’ Delerax snarled. ‘Now? What of the assault on the Raven Guard? We cannot let the Legion attack without orbital support.’

‘The orders come directly from the Warmaster,’ said Kordassis, directing a meaningful look at the lieutenant-commander.

‘I take my orders from our primarch,’ replied Delerax.

‘Legion command has confirmed the orders,’ said Kordassis. He shook his head sorrowfully. ‘They are authorised by Angron.’

‘Let the rest of the fleet deal with the problem,’ said Delerax. ‘They do not need us there.’

The internal communicator crackled into life and a mechanical voice cut across Kordassis’s reply.

‘I have monitored a transmission from your Legion commanders,’ it said. ‘Why have we not yet altered course to deal with this emerging threat?’

Clenching his fists, Delerax resisted the urge to smash the speaker. He took a deep breath, steadying himself as his lobotomiser initiated another flood of hormones and chemicals through his brain. With some effort he unclenched his fingers and flicked the comm switch.

‘I was denied at the dropsite, I will not be denied again,’ he told Horus’s liaison. ‘It is also tactically unsound to have no orbital support for the assault.’

‘That will be dealt with by other fleet vessels,’ said the other Space Marine. ‘Your orders are clear, lieutenant-commander. Obey them.’

‘Then let those other vessels deal with the situation at Isstvan IV,’ snapped Delerax. ‘The World Eaters should be protecting their own.’

‘You are part of an alliance, lieutenant-commander,’ replied the voice. Its sterile calmness, its assured tone, enraged Delerax more. ‘We each do our part for victory. Your part at this moment is to join the rest of your fleet moving to Isstvan IV. Do not forget you are Legiones Astartes. Maintain discipline and obey your orders.’

Branne felt uncomfortable as he watched the glowing blips on the sensor return moving from orbit around Isstvan V. Not until he had come to the system had he known apprehension, but it had become his permanent companion since he had realised the extent of the treachery that was unfolding here. At least he maintained some semblance of composure, unlike Valerius.

The praefector lurched between near-catatonia and panic. At the moment he was asleep, muttering to himself with head laid on a display screen. He twitched and mumbled, fingers dragging along the metal of the console on which he was slumped. Branne could only guess at the nightmare that plagued him, and was thankful that Legiones Astartes were not vulnerable to such terrors.

‘The World Eaters fleet is moving away,’ announced one of the scanner technicians.

Branne looked back at the display and saw the signal returns drifting further from Isstvan V, heading in-system.

‘It worked,’ he said. Branne nodded towards the fitful praefector. ‘Wake up Marcus.’

One of the aides shook the Imperial Army officer gently. Valerius rose from his dream with a moan and looked around the bridge, eyes fearful. He settled after a few moments and focussed on Branne.

‘What is happening?’ he asked, scratching a stubbled cheek with ragged nails.

Branne directed Valerius’s attention to the screen.

‘It worked?’ said the praefector, disbelief written on his features. His expression changed to a broad grin and he looked at the Raven Guard commander with wide eyes. He laughed. ‘They took the bait. They took the bait!’

‘Yes, they did,’ said Branne. ‘We have less than two hours to get into position. In one hour we will move to full drop formation. Brief your shuttle crews.’

‘Yes, I will,’ said Valerius, staggering towards the door.

‘Before you do, might I suggest you take a moment to make yourself presentable to your men,’ said Branne.

Valerius looked down at his dishevelled uniform and ran his fingers over the bristles on his chin. He nodded and straightened his sash. With a nervous cough, he left the bridge, walking with slow, deliberate strides. When he was gone, Branne turned his attention back to his crew, glad to be free of the distraction.

‘Any more comm intercepts?’ he asked.

‘None that are good, commander,’ said the crewman in charge of the communications array. He swallowed nervously and could not meet Branne’s eye. ‘World Eaters signals suggest they believe the Legion to be below ten thousand strong. Angron is all over the frequencies, declaring the destruction of the Raven Guard.’

‘We will not allow that to happen,’ said Branne. He turned to the sensor console. ‘What orbital assets have the World Eaters kept?’

‘None, commander,’ replied the technician. He wiped sweat from his bald head and leaned back in his seat. ‘None that we can detect.’

‘Perhaps this is just an elaborate trap,’ said Branne, thinking aloud. ‘They could have ships lying in wait for us. Maybe they’ve been monitoring us all along and this is to draw us in.’

‘Unlikely, commander,’ said the aide. ‘At this range, even on lowest output we would detect any plasma readings. It’s only our dispersion reflex shield that stops us being detected. The World Eaters don’t have those.’

‘That makes no sense,’ said Branne, returning to his command throne. ‘Why leave a gap in their defences? Are any other vessels moving to provide orbital support?’

‘Negative, commander,’ said the scanning officer. ‘The only other vessel in the vicinity is a World Eaters battle-barge, and it is changing course to follow the main fleet.’

Branne was immediately suspicious. It was not only a foolish oversight, it was inconceivable that a Space Marine would make such a mistake.

‘Ground defences in that area?’ he asked.

‘None that we are aware of,’ said the officer. ‘Archives on Isstvan V are quite up-to-date. The mountainous region is almost devoid of population, no defence installations. We are too far away to detect anything without revealing our location.’

As unsettling as the apparent lapse was, it was an opportunity that could not be thrown away. Branne checked the display again, calculating scanner ranges and speeds for the enemy vessels. They were already too far away to respond to the presence of the Raven Guard fleet. The longer he waited, the greater the chance that the World Eaters would attack. Angron was known for his lack of patience and might well launch his assault ahead of schedule. Stealth had again proven its worth. Now was the time for swiftness of action to show its value.

Branne swung in his chair towards the communications team.

‘Signal the fleet. Drop reflex shields and divert all power to engines and navigation. Inform all flight decks and drop-bays to prepare for immediate launch. Air crews to their craft. This is our chance to strike. The enemy will know that the Raven Guard are not yet dead!’

Metal rang on metal, filling Delerax’s chamber with noise. Steel plate buckled and tore as he pounded his fists into the wall, every impact sending a shower of metal splinters into the air. He grunted and growled as he punched, every smashing blow delivered with a snarl. His mind was aflame with his anger, his implant feeding his rage with a cocktail of stimulants.

He barely heard the sound of the comm alert through the thundering of his hearts. He ignored it and continued to vent his ire on the battered wall, slamming the cracked knuckles of his gauntlets into metal until he was pulverising the rockcrete bulkhead beneath.

A more insistent noise broke through his frenzy: the battle alert. The communications system bleeped again.

Shaking from frustration, the World Eater almost destroyed the communications panel with his stabbing finger. The speaker spat sparks but still worked, the voice of the chief scanning officer filtering through the rush of blood in Delerax’s ears.

‘Lieutenant-commander, we have detected an enemy fleet achieving orbit around Isstvan V. They are en route for the Legion’s position!’

‘Turn to engage, all power to engines!’ Delerax snarled. He did not care how the ships had eluded detection, or who they were. He felt a surge of vindication, his anger dissipating.

He ran from his quarters and headed for the bridge, pounding along the corridors until he reached the mechanical conveyor. His personal comm-system chimed in his ear.

‘Lieutenant-commander, what are your orders?’ asked Kordassis. ‘Sensors report a Raven Guard battle-barge and two cruisers in escort.’

‘Attack!’ Delerax snarled as he stepped through the opening doors of the conveyor. He prodded the button for the bridge. ‘Make all speed to intercept the flagship.’

‘Is that wise? We are outnumbered.’

‘Show some pride, Kordassis. We have been made to look like fools by Corax’s cowardly subterfuge. We attack, as World Eaters should.’

There was the sound of another communication connection for a few moments before Horus’s representative spoke into Delerax’s ear.

‘Why have we changed course, lieutenant-commander?’

‘Have you been asleep? The Raven Guard are attempting to escape.’

The conveyor jolted as it reached the level of the bridge and headed towards the prow of the battle-barge.

‘That is not your concern, lieutenant-commander,’ said Horus’s representative. ‘The matter is being dealt with.’

‘How?’ snapped Delerax. ‘We are the only ship with a hope of intercepting the evacuation fleet.’

‘Your orders have not changed, lieutenant-commander. If you persist in this disobedience I will have you removed from command.’

‘This is my ship, I will not be threatened by the likes of you,’ Delerax replied. He pulled the comm-bead from his ear and dashed it against the metal wall of the conveyor. The doors slid open a few seconds later and the World Eater strode out into the corridor and turned towards the bridge.

Inside, Kordassis was waiting, fully armoured, helm hanging from his belt. The scars on his face twisted as the captain smiled.

‘Not listening to your minder?’ said Kordassis.

‘What can he do to stop me?’ Delerax loomed over the navigation officers. ‘How long until we reach the Raven Guard ships?’

‘Twenty-six minutes, lieutenant-commander,’ the man replied. ‘Twenty if we overcharge the reactors.’

‘Do it. Every minute wasted gives the Raven Guard a chance to escape Angron’s assault.’ He turned his attention to the communications officer. ‘Any message from Legion command or the primarch?’

‘Negative, lieutenant-commander,’ the technician replied. ‘They may not even be aware of the fleet’s arrival.’

‘Signal them with the news and pass on that we are en route to engage the enemy,’ said Delerax. He addressed all of the bridge crew, looking at Kordassis. ‘We shall be lauded in the World Eaters’ roll of honour for today. It is we that shall bring about the destruction of Corax and his Legion!’

‘Contact established with the primarch!’ Valerius’s announcement that Corax still lived brought a cheer from the other members of the bridge staff. ‘The drop-ships are landing now.’

Branne nodded his understanding and looked at the main display. The course of the World Eater battle-barge was being tracked by a red dot. It was heading directly for the *Avenger*.

'Time until the evacuation is complete?' he asked.

'Thirty minutes, at least,' came the reply from Valerius.

'Too long,' Branne muttered. He opened up the fleet frequency with an armoured finger. 'This is Commander Branne to all vessels. We will remain in position for extraction. The evacuation is your only concern.'

A series of acknowledgements came back. It was a gamble. The fleet was too low in orbit and too close together to properly engage the incoming World Eaters ship, but if they dispersed, the lift to orbit would take even longer. Once every shuttle and drop-ship was back on board, the Raven Guard could fight off their attacker and leave.

'First craft laden and taking off,' reported Valerius.

There was a laugh from one of the communications aides.

'Listen to this!' he said, channelling a signal to the bridge's speakers.

'...ng away! Fall upon them, my World Eaters, do not let them escape!' A bestial, rage-filled howl rang around the bridge. 'Corax! I know you can hear me! Come back and fight like a Space Marine, you coward! I have promised your blood to my blade and your head to the Warmaster, and I shall deliver both. Face me, you dishonourable bastard!'

Angron's voice devolved into snarls and wordless pants. Branne signalled for the officer to cut the signal.

The minutes ticked past slowly. Branne sat in his command throne, dividing his attention between the chronometer and the position of the enemy battle-barge. It was going to be close.

'Corax is aboard the last drop-ship,' Valerius said. He slumped back into his seat and looked at Branne. 'Do you trust me now?'

The Raven Guard commander crossed the bridge and gently grasped the red sash across the praefector's chest.

'Your life is yours,' said Branne. He let go of the sash and soothed away the crease he had made. 'Your family's honour is upheld. I am sorry for my distrust, Marcus.'

Valerius sighed and smiled.

'It does not really matter, does it?' he said, tugging at the sash. 'Honour, loyalty, family. Horus will care for none of that.'

'And that is why they are more important than ever,' said Branne. 'Especially loyalty.'

Weapon bays opened along the length of the *Dedicated Wrath* revealing banks of macro-cannons, plasma drivers and missile bays, like a savage hound baring its teeth. Along the dorsal superstructure, bombardment turrets swivelled, their cannons extending from armoured towers. Retro-thrusters fired along the battle-barge's length as it reduced speed for the attack, its course curving gracefully to starboard so that its massive broadside would be brought to bear.

On the bridge, Delerax stood behind his command throne, his fingers gripping its back. The display was alive with signals showing the position of the Raven Guard vessels and their returning drop-craft. The World Eater had calculated his angle of attack to bring him between the enemy battle-barge and the returning flotilla of landing craft.

He heard the growl of the bridge doors opening and turned to see Horus's representative enter. The Space Marine wore his helmet, as he had done in every meeting since coming aboard. His armour was painted in blue livery, but was otherwise devoid of any organisational markings.

'Cease your attack, lieutenant-commander.' The order came in a calm, clipped tone from the Space Marine's external address system, and had the ring of artificial modulation to disguise it.

Delerax laughed and turned back to the main screen.

'Corax and his Legion are doomed,' he said. 'See for yourself. In less than ten minutes, we will open fire and destroy them forever.'

'I speak with the authority of the Warmaster,' said the Space Marine. 'Cease your attack immediately.'

'That authority counts for nothing here,' said Delerax. He turned and squared off against the other. 'If you want your orders to be obeyed, return to the Alpha Legion where you belong.'

'It is has been decided that Corax has still a part to play,' said the Alpha Legionnaire. 'It has been decided that for the moment he will be allowed to live.'

'Decided by you?' Delerax's question was harsh with scorn. 'Who are you to make such a decision?'

'I am Alpharius,' said the Legionnaire.

'Remove yourself from my bridge, or I will have your corpse removed.'

Delerax glimpsed Kordassis to his left, pulling a bolt pistol from its holster. The World Eater smiled at the Alpha Legionnaire. His smile faded as he felt the cold touch of a muzzle against his cheek. He turned his head a fraction to see Kordassis holding his pistol to Delerax's head.

'What is this?' the lieutenant-commander hissed. 'What are you doing, Kordassis?'

'I am not Kordassis,' said the Space Marine holding the bolt pistol. 'I am Alpharius.'

Delerax twisted and made a lunge for the traitor's gun. Muzzle flash blinded the World Eater and an instant later he felt the side of his skull exploding.

Branne stood in the docking bay watching the drop-ships landing. The first were already disembarking their passengers. With weary

steps, the survivors of the Raven Guard filed down the ramps onto the deck.

They were a terrible sight. Most showed signs of injury. Their armour was a patchwork of colours; here the silver of an Iron Warrior shoulder pad; there the grey breastplate of a Word Bearer. Their armour was cracked and broken, bloodied and stained, and every face Branne looked upon was etched with fatigue. Glassy-eyed, the last survivors of the dropsite massacre trudged across the loading bay, welcomed by smiles and cheers from Branne's warriors.

The last of the shuttles touched down. Branne approached it as the docking ramp lowered. The first Space Marine out was a bizarre sight, his armour a mess of colours and bare ceramite. Only his shoulder pad bearing the Legion's badge remained from his original suit. He took off his helmet and tossed it the floor.

'Agapito!' Branne laughed. He slapped a hand to his true brother's chest. 'I knew you would be alive. Too stubborn to let something like this kill you.'

Branne looked closely at his brother, amazed by his outlandish appearance. A new scar ran from his right cheek to his throat, but beyond that it was the same face Branne had known for his whole life. Agapito returned the smile wearily. His deep brown eyes regarded Branne warmly. He reached a hand behind Branne's head and pulled him closer. The two touched foreheads in a sign of respect and comradeship.

'I see you have not managed to stay out of trouble, Branne.'

The commander stepped back from Agapito to see Corax descending the ramp. The primarch towered over his Legiones Astartes, his black armour showing as much wear and tear as that of those under his command.

'I was monitoring your transmissions,' said Corax. 'Why did the enemy abort their attack?'

'I have no idea, Lord Corax,' said Branne. 'Perhaps they thought better of the idea, taking on three vessels at once.'

'Where are they now?' asked the primarch.

'They've withdrawn to a hundred thousand kilometres,' Branne replied. 'They don't look as if they'll try to attack again.'

'Odd,' said Corax. He shook his head as if dismissing a thought. 'Signal the other ships to make course for Deliverance.'

'Yes, Lord Corax,' Branne said, holding his fist to his chest. 'And where are we to head?'

'Terra,' replied the primarch. 'I must have an audience with the Emperor.'

Blood and brains leaked from the side of Delerax's skull. The World Eaters lieutenant-commander could feel his life leaking away with it. He could not move his legs and arms, and could feel nothing below his neck. It was an effort just to breathe.

He swivelled his eyes up to Kordassis, wondering who it was he looked at.

'Why?' he asked, his voice barely a whisper.

The Alpha Legionnaire loomed into view, stooping over Delerax. The World Eater could see his ravaged face reflected in the dark eye lenses of the Alpha Legionnaire's helmet. That blank mask betrayed nothing of the Space Marine's thoughts or mood. His metal-edged voice seemed distant as Delerax drew a last, rattling breath.

'In times such as these, even the most trusted face can conceal an enemy.'

Little Horus

Dan Abnett

‘Look like the innocent flower,
but be the serpent under it.’

– Litus, *Remarks*.

Let us speak of Little Horus, Little Horus Aximand. His aspect was the half moon, and his disposition, according to the humours, was inclining towards melancholia. This explained, many thought, his prevailing mood of sorrow and inner trouble, though he frequently denied it. ‘The melancholic humour is misunderstood,’ he said. ‘You think too literally. It has, in fact, the quality of autumn. It is the spirit of contemplative change, the accelerator of death, the enabler of ends and beginnings. Autumn clears away the world so that a new one may rise. This is my purpose. I am not sad.’

Of course, once they reattached his face, all he ever really looked was angry.

Dwell lay in their path, and illumination was required. The Dwellers were not *Old Way* ignorant. The shadows of the Long Night had been previously banished from their shores, and they had been compliant since their recovery thirty-two years earlier. The Dwellers had supplied eighty fine, *loyal* regiments to the Crusade armies.

Isstvan was fresh in the memory, however, and blood-stained rumours of the infamy were spreading. A ferocious series of repercussive combats had flared through the Momed, Instar and Oqueth sectors. The instigator was a leader of the Iron Tenth, a flesh-spare warleader of the Sorrgol Clan named Shadrak Meduson, and it was he who marshalled the loyalists against the approaching fleet of the Warmaster’s 63rd Expedition. Meduson and his formations had come too late to stand with their Iron-handed master at Isstvan V. Rage, and calculated vengeance, smoked in his alloy heart. He had gathered fifty-eight full battalions of the Imperial Army about him, war hosts from the Momed voidhives, along with a flotilla of siege hulks from Nahan Instar, a half-broken cadre of Salamanders, some Mechanicum claves, and a White Scars raid-force rerouted from a return voyage to the Chondax war front.

Dwell, with its fortified cities, orbital batteries, ship schools, and eight million pinnacle-grade fighting men, would be the cornerstone of Meduson’s line. And any fool could see the Elders of Dwell would never side against the Throne.

It was a matter of priority that their ignorance be illuminated swiftly, before they fell in step with the determined son of Medusa.

Aximand’s face had earned him his name, though he was not the only member of the Sixteenth Legion who resembled the primarch. For a good many, including the First Captain, elective genetics had guaranteed it. They were sons, *true* sons, amongst the Sons.

Aximand was the most alike of them all. It was not only the face; there was something in the manner of him.

Of course, he was Horus too, a common Cthonic name made popular because of the primarch. They were all sons of Horus in the end.

Little Horus. That’s what he was called, in tones simultaneously affectionate and mocking: Little Horus Aximand.

There was nothing little about him. Captain of the Fifth. One quarter of the Mournival.

‘He who serves as a captain here would be as a primarch in the company of others,’ said Abaddon, and he was talking of Aximand when he said it.

The reattachment left a scar. It set the character of the face differently, altered the seating of the muscles. Somehow, the wrongness, the imperfection, made him more like Horus, not less.

Steel forged on Medusa has such a fine edge.

He had a dream he never shared with anyone. First Captain Abaddon had indeed proclaimed that dreams were a weakness to be eschewed by all the Adeptus Astartes. The dreamless Luna Wolves were surely the purest of all.

But times changed. The Luna Wolves had become the Sons of Horus. Kin had become unkind. The all-father of man had become the enemy. And, since Isstvan, Little Horus Aximand had begun to dream.

Every dream was essentially the same. Aximand would dream about the events of the day. The dream would match, in all particulars, his experiences, except that someone else was present. Someone else had come to join him, an intruder who remained just out of sight or in distant shadows, in the next room, or the corner of his eye. Aximand could not see the intruder’s face, but he knew he was there.

Aximand could feel him watching. He could hear him breathing.

Little Horus was afraid of the dreams at first. He was afraid to have started dreaming, afraid of what Abaddon might say if he found out, afraid of the faceless intruder watching him whenever he slept.

But he was not afraid of change. Change was, he insisted, part of his ruling character.

'The melancholic humour is protean,' he said. 'It possesses the quality of autumn. It is transformative, the accelerator of death, the enabler of ends and beginnings. Autumn clears away the world ready for renewal. This is my purpose. I am not afraid.'

Then again, after they reattached his face, all he ever really looked was unlike himself.

Another change, forced on them by the circumstances of Isstvan, was the loss of the Mournival. Changing the name of the Sixteenth, changing the colour of their armour, those transformations had been embraced willingly as positive reinforcements of their resolve. They had never changed their allegiance: they still followed Horus and the Imperium.

The Mournival, though, the Mournival was a painful loss. That small clique of sons, of peers, of brothers, selected to counsel the Warmaster had always been vital, organic.

Little Horus still wore the mark of the half-moon on his helm, above the right eye-piece.

As the fleet translated into the Dwell system, he spoke to Abaddon on the subject.

'It is an antiquated concept,' said the First Captain. 'See how poorly it served us at Isstvan?'

'People served us poorly,' Aximand replied, 'not the Mournival. The Mournival was always intended to provide even-tempered advice. It was supposed to provoke discussion and dissent, so that we could properly debate each issue and be sure of arriving at balanced reasoning.'

Abaddon looked at him, uncertain.

Aximand smiled back.

'It is true to say,' he added, 'that the decisions we had to make at Davin and Isstvan were so extreme, the natural dissent was...'

'Was what?' asked Abaddon.

'Intense. Those who lost the argument could not be permitted to live. It is the way of things. When the matter is so great, those who speak against it become our enemies. They had to say *no*, for in their *no* our *yes* was consecrated.'

They. Abaddon and Aximand never spoke the names any more. Previous members of the Mournival, perhaps: Berabaddon, Syrakul, Janipur and dear Sejanus. All of them were spoken of, as one would speak of beloved ancestors. But the last two to come and go, their names were never uttered. They were memories too painful for even a transhuman to bear.

'The mechanism always worked,' Aximand pressed, dropping his soft voice to a leaf-rustle whisper, making Abaddon bend closer to hear. Below them, the vast bridge bustled with activity.

'The mechanism always worked, even when we had to kill our dissenters. The method was valid and valuable. The Mournival provides balance, and guarantees the right decisions.'

'So you would reinstate it?' asked Abaddon.

'Do we not need balance now, more than ever?'

'You would reinstate it?' Abaddon repeated.

'It was never gone,' said Aximand. 'There are simply vacancies.'

'Who would you approach?' asked Abaddon.

'Who would you?'

Abaddon sniffed.

'Targost.'

Aximand shrugged.

'A sound suggestion. Serghar Targost is heartwood like us, but he is also lodge-master. The lodge needs him clear-minded, not compromised by Mournival duties.'

Abaddon nodded, seeing the sense of this.

'Falkus Kibre,' said Abaddon.

'Hmmm.' Aximand smiled again. Widowmaker Kibre was a true son, but he was also Captain of the Justaerin, and thus Abaddon's number two. Too much weight in one corner of the Legion.

'Kibre's an excellent man,' he began.

'Kalus Ekaddon,' said Abaddon, before Aximand could finish.

Ekaddon. Captain of the Catulan Reaver squad. Another of Abaddon's company. Aximand wondered if Abaddon properly understood the concept of balance.

'You make a suggestion, then,' said Abaddon.

'Tybalt Marr.'

'The Either? He's a good man, but he hasn't got the stomach for the job, not even now he's shaken off Moy's shadow. Kibre is a good–'

'Jerrod,' said Aximand.

'He's got his hands full taking the reins of the Thirteenth now Sedirae's gone,' Abaddon replied.

'He's more than able.'

‘He is, but he has new responsibilities,’ said Abaddon.
‘Grael Noctua,’ said Aximand.
The First Captain paused.
‘Of the Twenty-Fifth Warlocked?’
‘Yes.’
‘He’s just a squad commander.’
Aximand shrugged. He took up a silver cup from the side table and sipped.
‘There is no rule that members of the Mournival be seniors or captains. In fact, if it were just composed of senior men, where would its point be? The Mournival is about balance and perspective. Wouldn’t a good squad leader’s insight complement the judgement of a first captain?’
‘Noctua is a fine soldier,’ Abaddon mused.
‘A captain in the making.’
‘He’s young.’
‘We were all young once, Ezekyle.’
Abaddon took up a cup of his own, not to drink, just to have something to toy with while he considered.
‘There is precedence, of course,’ said Aximand. ‘To remind you, Syrakul was a squad leader when Litus proposed him. He was ascendant. He was young, but Litus saw his qualities. You’ve said yourself, Syrakul would have been first captain if he’d lived.’
‘The same could be said for many,’ Abaddon replied. ‘We should consult Lupercal and–’
‘Why would we?’ asked Aximand. ‘The Mournival has always been an autonomous body. Lupercal likes it that way.’
Abaddon frowned.
‘I suppose. So, Kibre and Noctua?’
‘Yes.’
‘You will approach Noctua, if I make the overture to Falkus?’
‘Agreed.’
‘Put him in the line with you at Dwell,’ said Abaddon. ‘Measure him one last time to be sure. You know the old saying? Measure twice, cut once.’

The Mausolytic Precinct was regarded as one of the top three objectives, along with the primary port and the city of the Elders. The Precinct was sited on a high plateau overlooking Tyjun and the Sea of Enna. In its great, stone structures lay the dead of Dwell, each previous generation interred in ritual cybernation so that their collective thoughts, memories and accumulated knowledge could be accessed and consulted, like books in a library.
The Mausolytic Precinct was Aximand’s responsibility. First Company would lead the attack on the city of Elders. Lithonan, the acting Lord Commander of the Army, would take responsibility for the port, with Jerrod and the Thirteenth as their spearhead.
‘I would be disappointed if we were forced to lose a resource like the Mausolytic Precinct,’ the Warmaster told Little Horus. ‘But I would be more disappointed if we lost this fight. Burn it only if the alternative is losing.’
‘Yes, my lord,’ said Aximand.

‘I would be disappointed if we were forced to lose a resource like the Mausolytic Precinct,’ the Warmaster told Little Horus. The only light in the chamber came from the fire crackling in the great stone bowl.
‘But I would be more disappointed if we lost this fight. Burn it only if the alternative is... Aximand?’
‘Yes, my lord?’ said Aximand.
‘Your attention is elsewhere, I think.’
‘Lupercal, I’m sorry. For a moment there...’
‘What?’
‘I could hear breathing, my lord.’
The Warmaster regarded him with what looked like amusement.
‘We all do it,’ he said.
‘No, I mean... Do you not hear it?’
‘I hear weakness,’ said the Warmaster. ‘Where is this frailty coming from, Aximand? You’re jumpy.’
‘My lord, is there somebody else in your quarters with us?’
‘No. No, there isn’t. I know this for a fact.’
Aximand rose to his feet.
‘Then who is that?’ he asked. ‘Lord, who is that, standing just there, on the other side of the fire?’
‘Oh Little Horus,’ said the Warmaster, ‘you are beginning to speak with the tongue of madness.’
And just as Aximand realised that he was, he woke.

He assembled his squad commanders, and reviewed the tactical data. Aximand was, perhaps, the most scrupulous of all the Sixteenth

Legion's captains. He was not one, like Targost for example, who only ever wanted to know the fundamentals of a target, or was annoyed by extraneous detail. Aximand liked to know everything, every last facet. He studied climate charts. He learned the names and phases of Dwell's eighteen moons. He studied the intelligencer plans of the Mausolytic Precinct, and had the Fleetmaster's strategic architects fashion a sensory simulation he could walk through.

He learned the names of his foe. The Tyjunate Compulsories, a high-calibre division of ceremonial city troops whose duty it was, by tradition, to protect the Precinct. The Chainveil, an elite corps named after the ritual screen surrounding the thrones of the Elders of Dwell, who were rumoured to be supplementing the Mausolytic defence.

No confirmation had yet come of Meduson or any of his agents reaching Dwell. If he had beaten the 63rd in the race, it was thought unlikely he would position himself at the Precinct. This role would probably be handed off to one of his trusted warleaders, perhaps Bion Henricos, or to one of the White Scars captains such as Hibou Khan or Kublon Besk.

'Let us hope for the Fifth,' said Lev Goshen, Captain of the Twenty Fifth Company, who was to command the second wave behind Aximand. 'Ill-favoured for static defence, they will make themselves crazy waiting for our overture, stuck in one place.'

'The Scars should not be underestimated,' said Grael Noctua, Sergeant of the Warlocked Tactical Squad.

Goshen glanced up from the strategium display, looked at Noctua, and caught Aximand's eye.

'He's got a voice, then,' he remarked.

There had been some murmuring amongst the upper ranks of the Legion when Noctua's role as second to Aximand for the Mausolytic assault had been announced.

'I have been advised I had better use it well, captain,' said Noctua. There was a reserve to him, a restraint that reminded Aximand of someone. Noctua had that *true son* face, but the balance of humours was unusual: there was less of the arrogant charismatic and more of the calculated intellectual. Abaddon described Noctua as a blade weapon rather than a firearm.

Goshen grinned.

'Let's have your wisdom, Noctua,' he said.

'I had the honour to serve alongside a detachment of the Fifth Legion seven years ago during the Tyrade System Compliance. They impressed me with their battlecraft. I was reminded of the Wolves.'

'The Luna Wolves?' asked Goshen.

'The Wolves of Fenris, sir,' Noctua replied.

'That's *two* enemies you've mentioned,' said Goshen. 'You *understand* they are our enemies, don't you, Noctua?'

'I understand they are both utterly lethal,' replied Noctua. 'Should we not appreciate the qualities of our enemies above all else?'

Goshen hesitated.

'This terrace here, this parade,' he said, returning to the chart display. 'We will need air cover to achieve it.'

The briefing continued. Aximand thought for a moment that someone else had something to say, someone who had come into the room late, to stand at the back of the grouped officers.

But there was nobody there.

'I hear you're considering Kibre and Noctua,' said the Warmaster.

'You hear everything, as usual,' Aximand replied.

'Not Targost, then?'

'He has other responsibilities,' said Aximand, 'and we did not wish to dilute them.'

The Warmaster nodded. He moved another carved bone counter across the board between them. Of all his sons, Aximand most enjoyed the practice and discipline of strategy games. The anteroom was furnished with many fine sets, most of them gifts from war leaders or brother primarchs. There was regicide, chatranj, caturanga, go, hneftafl, xadrez, mahnkala, zatrikion... It was rare to find a primarch's homeworld where a skill-honing wargame had not evolved.

'Ezekyle favoured Targost, didn't he?' asked the Warmaster as Aximand studied the field and contemplated his reply.

'He did, sir.'

'And when you persuaded him against the choice, did you tell him the real reason, or did you manufacture one that would be more palatable to him?'

Aximand hesitated. He remembered the conversation with Abaddon, wherein he had not chosen to say that Targost, the Captain of the Seventh Company, was not a son, a *true* son. He was Cthonic stock. Aximand had not chosen to reveal that part of his disinclination.

'I didn't–' Aximand started to say.

'Tell him?' asked the primarch.

'I didn't... recognise my true motive,' Aximand replied, with reluctance.

'Interesting when you see it, though, don't you think?' the Warmaster asked, sitting back. 'You and Ezekyle, Widowmaker and Noctua, all of you... What is it you call it? *True sons*?'

'True sons,' Aximand echoed.

'So, do you suppose,' the Warmaster chuckled, 'it is because you prefer the reassurance of a familiar face? Or is there another face you wish to block out?'

Dry air, cool, a faint hint of salt. The Sea of Enna in the flat rift valley below, like a sheet of glass in a culvert. Along its shore, the teeming city of Tyjun, collected like flotsam, like multicoloured shingle. On the far side of the immense valley, across the back of the sleeping sea, the block line of the opposite valley wall, squared off and velvet black in the dawn light. The sky was violet, shot with stars and occasional moons. To the north, the pre-glow of the rising sun. To the east, the false dawn of the port, on fire since midnight. That was the handiwork of Jerrod and Thirteenth Company.

In the high morning of the Mausolytic plateau, the buildings of the Precinct stood like stone hangars for vast airships. Rectangles, unadorned, they were faced with yellow stone rendered gold by the early light. In places they were linked by soaring colonnades and porticos, gold stone columns the size of ancient redwoods. The pavements were made of etched steel, polished like mirrors. The atmosphere held a dry, static charge, as if great electromagnetic machines operated nearby.

The vaunted Chainveil made no appearance in the direct line at the Precinct. Chainveil soldiers caused a brief delay to Abaddon's advance into the City of Elders. The First Captain made curt, grudging reports of their determined resistance. Goshen's advance took a bastion west of the city where the defenders boasted they were Chainveil, but Goshen was sure they were merely regular army claiming to be the elites, so as to seem more intimidating.

He slew them all, anyway.

The Tyjunate Compulsories, resplendent in silver and crimson wargear, formed the main defence. The troopers were armed with long power swords, with energised axes and pikes, with munition-loaders, with sonic tubes, with plasmic-system weapons and las-rifles. Entering combat, they engaged individual, segmented force shields, light-absorbing fog that dimmed the glory of their ritual uniforms and made them look as if they'd each been enveloped in a hand-cut piece of storm cloud.

The shields were annoyingly effective, and deflected most gunfire over a certain range. When a Legiones Astartes bolt-round did pierce them, either through a direct hit or by finding the joint between segments, the Compulsory inside detonated, and his explosive demise was contained, pressurised, inside the shield, like a firecracker destroying a piece of soft fruit inside a bottle. The noise of it was dull, muted, like the slap of a muffled bass drum.

It was infuriating. Dug in around the looming structures of the Precinct, the Compulsories were actually retarding a Legiones Astartes assault. They were holding the line against the Sixteenth.

Yet they were men. Just *men*. Aximand felt a sense of injustice. The force shields, certainly not the best he'd ever seen, but made effective by their individual mounts and portability, were giving the Compulsories enough of an edge to *bother* the Sons of Horus. It was an aberration brought about by circumstance. Human soldiers, no matter how good they were, did not resist transhuman soldiers. Aximand wanted to crush them, pulverise them for their temerity, to call in an orbital barrage, ranged shelling, or even one of the squadrons of superheavy armour pieces that were basking nearby like vast crocodilian predators in the rising sun, waiting for his word to send them slipping down to the kill.

However, any of those actions would also raze the Precinct. The Compulsories were protected by the very buildings they were defending. Aximand had latitude, but he sincerely intended to prove he didn't need it.

Less than twenty minutes from drop landing, the assault on the Mausolytic Precinct had grown bitter and choked. The Sons of Horus and their Army auxiliaries had lost momentum, their offensive stalled, all their advantages cancelled out by the clear-sighted deployment of professional soldiers exploiting their combat assets.

Yade Durso, second captain of Aximand's company, cursed all the spirits of vengeance and destiny over the vox-link, but Aximand knew Durso was actually cursing him. Xachary Scipion of Metallun Reaver reported his assumption of squad command. His sergeant, old Gaspir Yunkwist, was dead. There was heat in Scipion's voice. He was calling for an Apothecary. Zeb Zenonius of Bale Tactical reported two fallen.

Somewhere, someone was breathing.

Taking hits, driven into cover, Aximand looked up at the sky above the plateau. It was still flooded with the blue ink of night, but the pale margins were increasing. He could see four of Dwell's moons in the sky, one large, the other three not much larger than stars. Because of their relative positions, they were each in a different phase: full, gibbous, half, new.

The sight of it let his anger breathe out for a second. It was, what? A sign? A portent?

His vox tapped. Visor display identified the link as Grael Noctua.

'Forget bolters,' said Noctua. 'Blades.'

'Indeed?' Aximand replied.

'Get in close, and the fools do not stand a chance,' Noctua replied.

Aximand smiled.

'Blades! he yelled. He locked his bolter to his hip, and unsheathed his sword. Double-edged, power-active, Cthonic bluesteel, etched along the fuller. He'd called it *Mourn-it-all*. His combat shield was already on his left arm.

He didn't wait to see his order observed. He powered out of cover, lasbolts clipping his shield face and dinking his leg plates. Two big, bounding strides put him on the colonnade, moving fast, head down, blade up. He saw the first of the Compulsories up ahead, fogged in their shields, dug in around the massive pillars, firing at him. He could see their faces, pale and astonished.

Transhuman dread. Aximand had heard iterators talk of the condition. He'd heard descriptions of it from regular Army officers too. The sight of an Adeptus Astartes was one thing: taller and broader than a man could ever be, armoured like a demigod. The singularity of purpose was self-evident. An Adeptus Astartes was designed to fight and kill anything that didn't annihilate it first. If you saw an Adeptus Astartes, you knew you were in trouble. The appearance alone cowed you with fear.

But to see one *move*. Apparently *that* was the real thing. Nothing human-shaped should be so fast, so lithe, so powerful, especially not anything in excess of two metres tall and carrying more armour than four normal men could lift. The sight of an Adeptus Astartes was one thing, but the moving fact of one was quite another. The psychologists called it transhuman dread. It froze a man, stuck him to the ground, caused his mind to lock up, made him lose control of bladder and bowel. Something huge and warlike gave pause: something huge and warlike and moving with the speed of a striking snake, that was when you knew that gods moved amongst men, and that there existed a scale of strength and speed beyond anything mortal, and that you were about to die and, if you were really lucking, there might be just enough time to piss yourself first.

Aximand saw that dumbfounded look on the faces of the Dwellers he was about to gut and section. He heard the men of Fifth Company following behind him. He felt the joy of being Horus's son.

Noctua was right. They had been wasting time and effort with guns and bolters. The shields were good enough to make the percentages of a firefight poor. The shields were good enough to stop blades too. Bayonets, that was. Pole arms. A sabre. Maybe even a powered blade.

But not, not for a *moment*, a powered blade driven by transhuman arm.

The shields shattered. They cracked and broke with the sounds of smashing glass. Sharp chips of shield segment flew into the air for a microsecond after each blow before evaporating, the shield first, and then the body inside: the energy shell, then the meat. Blood exploded from the yawning wounds under pressure, jetting into the morning air, hosing Aximand and the great columns of the colonnade with arterial spray. Each sword stroke made an explosion of viscera, a puff of red in the air as if a bag of blood had been detonated and its contents particulated.

Whatever edge the Tyjunate Compulsories had owned, they lost it the moment the most advanced warriors in the Imperium remembered they were adaptable enough to fight the old-fashioned way: blade and trade, strength of arm, sword-school close combat.

The Fifth made the entrance to the Precinct less than five minutes after Aximand's inspiring charge.

Aximand went into the thick of it with three sons at his side: Zenonius of Bale, Ger Geraddon, and Mir Amindaza, both of Tithonus Assault. They went in at the end of the grand colonnade, under a gateway called the Arch of Answers. Dweller Compulsories were packed in beneath the shadow of the vast archway, ready to defend the sunward entrances of the East Mausolytic Hall.

The air was full of shots, like neon rain, horizontal. Energy bolts and tracer rounds shone especially brightly in the shade of the vast archway. The Sons struck the line with their heads down and their shields up, sucking up the lancing gunfire, barrelling Compulsories over in a crush, like a surging mass of rioters. Dwellers fell, their shields still lit, rolling and bouncing inside the hard-light shells. There was a crush, a sense of crowd momentum, of thousands of bodies rippling as one mass. There were bodies underfoot. Hands clawed. Weapons fired point blank.

The Sons bit deeper. Their shields were ploughs and rams. Their swords were scythes and pikes. Compulsories dropped, spilling from their shredding, fizzling shields in tattered states, blood sobbing and squirting out of the compromised fields. Blades hooked other men, hurled them into the air, their bodies spinning, tumbling, flailing overhead, above the crowd, crashing back down on the necks and shoulders of their kin. Some men were dead, upright, their bodies kept from falling by the press of the mass. The mirrored pavements were running with blood. The huge pool, draining out from under the fighting mass, spread its racing edges out across the etched steel, wider, broader, crimson in the sunlight, scarlet in the shadows, flooding around the bases of the columns, making islands out of plinths and pillars.

The screaming voices of the Compulsories were either muffled by their cocooning shields or rendered tinny and raw by the vox-intercept feeding into the comm systems of the Legiones Astartes. Most of the sounds Aximand registered were the concussive impacts as he chopped and barged and hacked. *Mourn-it-all* was running red on its hilt and grip, blood-smoke cooking off the powered blade. Blood had painted Aximand's sword arm to the elbow and was dripping off the edges of his vambrace. His shield boss was bruised, and splattered with gore and brain matter.

Behind everything, he could hear breathing.

Zenonius moved past him, shield up, ripping through waists and hips and ribcages with broad, horizontal slashes, bisecting bodies, rupturing shields. It was a devastating, mechanical action, almost agricultural rather than martial. He was reaping his way through the enemy to reach the Mausolytic Halls. Like a worker in a field of crops, he was cutting his row, back and forth, swinging his long blade from the shoulders.

To Aximand's left, Amindaza was treating it more as sport. His blade was shorter, and he toyed with the Compulsories he was rushing, as if trying to engage them in combat and test their skill. He looked for blades to lock with, to deflect. No one met his challenge. They were too busy trying to fall back out of the path of his butcher assault. Amindaza favoured hacking downstrokes, deep, crushing blows coming from over the shoulder that demolished his foes and smashed them onto the ground at his feet. Aximand could hear him calling out his enemies, daring them to fight him. He railed contempt at their attempts to retreat. He killed men whether they were facing him or not.

For his part, Aximand, like Geraddon, preferred a more textbook mass assault form: shield at eye level, used as ram; sword tip-forward at chest level, punching and stabbing like a piston from under the shield rim. It was relentless. It was like rolling a heavy piece of fruit into rows of toy soldiers and watching them knocked down and scattered.

The assault was so fierce that a brown smoke of aerosolised blood was fuming off the fighting line into the sunlight.

Zenonius reached the East Hall entrance, and slaughtered a dozen Compulsories around the ornamental fountain and pool in the deep, sunlit antehall. Larger cohorts of Aximand's company were on their heels on the colonnade. The lake of blood was so deep and swollen, there was some pressure in it as it grew and spread. Bodies on the smooth, polished floor rotated in its current, end to end, like sticks of driftwood caught by an overspilling river.

Aximand followed Zenonius into the antehall. The walls were sheer, the height of the hall impressive, though the floor plan was a small, square area with a central fountain. The top was open to the sky, so that sunlight could lance down and illuminate the quiet space, the polished floor, the clear water, the calyx and tulip carvings of the fountain's main figure.

Blood spattered the floor, and pooled around crumpled figures and broken weapons. Bloody handprints marked the edges of the fountain bowl where men had struggled to prop themselves up as their last breaths escaped. On the intricately carved walls, jets of blood had left long, pressure-pattern arcs, huge horsetail fans or fern-frond spatters. Some stretched five or six metres up the sheer walls.

Aximand prowled forward. The place was almost tranquil. The din of fighting outside, muffled by the walls, sounded more like the grumble of a distant storm. Zenonius moved ahead, pausing to finish a wounded Compulsory. Amindaza stepped into the light on the far side of the ante-hall, blade sizzling with frying blood. He had entered via one of the other doorways. Two Compulsories and a Precinct docent rushed him, and he turned to greet them with his sword.

Aximand could hear breathing again. It was close now, closer than ever before, closer than a pulse beat in a man's brow. The breathing, the sense of presence, had followed him out of his dreams and into his daily life. It had got closer and closer, until it was hovering at his shoulder. Now it sounded as though it were sharing his helmet, as though there were two heads in the one helm. Aximand stopped breathing for a moment to see if it was just some acoustic trick, an echo of his respiration.

Silence.

He was about to breathe again when it started, quiet but close, slow and clam, like the hushing of a gentle sea.

'Where are you?' he asked.

'Say again!' Amindaza crackled over the vox.

'Specify, sir?' Geraddon linked.

'Nothing, nothing!' Aximand answered. 'Continue.'

Foolish, so foolish, to let it better him like that. To make him speak of it, to speak out loud. He was only talking to himself, to a trick of his mind. He was only talking to his fear.

And fear, like dreams, was something an Adeptus Astartes was not supposed to have.

He knew fear, and he knew the fear would go the moment he could identify the stranger, the moment the intruder's face became plain to him. Little Horus Aximand wasn't afraid of anything except the unknown.

A Compulsory charged him from the brown shadows, a lance in his hands. The blade-tip twinkled with blue light, a photonic edge.

Aximand sidestepped, swung his shield, and put the man on the floor. The blow cracked the Compulsory's bodyshield and broke his arm. He yelped. Aximand was about to put his foot on him and finish the job when two more came at him. Faster now, more urgent, he rotated, scooping *Mourn-it-all* around in a backwards stroke that snipped the blade-heads off the lances stabbing at him. The blunt hafts cracked and bent against his ceramite armour. His sword ripped one man apart, opening his shield and eviscerating the body inside. He kicked the other backwards, crunching man and energy cocoon into the ante-hall wall. The impact grazed the stone, and caused chips to fly out. Stepping in, Aximand put his blade through the man's chest. *Mourn-it-all* punched through the shield shell, the man, and the wall behind him. The Compulsory was pinned there for a second, like an insect specimen on a felt pad, his body-shield flickering and blinking as it shorted out.

Aximand yanked the blade out, and the man collapsed at his feet.

The breathing had drawn so very close.

Aximand stepped forward, through a tall archway, into one of the main Mausolytic Halls. The space was vast, and the air was radiant with yellow light. It was like stepping into heaven. The thin, quiet, shrouded dead of Dwell were suspended all around him in clear glass tubes, supported horizontally in columns of light. A million bodies, framed in light and glass and gravimetric energy, united in cybernation.

Zeb Zenonius of Bale tactical squad lay dead on the floor. He had been split open like a piece of shellfish.

The sight should have put Aximand on guard, on the highest pitch of readiness and alertness. But the breathing was louder than ever and, despite his transhuman instincts, he tried to see where it was coming from.

So the first blow took him by surprise. His attacker struck from the side. Only by fluke did Aximand's shield take the brunt of it. The attacker's sword split the shield, and cut into Aximand's forearm beneath. Aximand staggered backwards, outraged and surprised.

Outraged by his distracted error.

Surprised by the vast strength of the being assaulting him.

Aximand rallied, blocking with his sword. He was face to face with a Legiones Astartes, a flesh-spare brute whose glossy black armour was laced with augmetic systems and stark white insignia: a senior captain of the Tenth Legion, the Iron Hands of Medusa. For a moment, Aximand thought it was Shadrak Meduson himself. The warrior had the stature of a warleader, and bore the sigils of the Sorrgol Clan. But visual tagging via visor display identified his foe as Bion Henricos, Meduson's favoured lieutenant. Henricos's sword was a long blade of augmented-function Medusan steel.

They whirled down the cybernation hall like dancers, trading blows. Henricos represented a greater challenge than all the Compulsories Aximand had doomed that day, combined. The Medusan's skill was formidable. His augmetic strength far exceeded Aximand's. His speed was breathtaking.

For a thrilling instant, Aximand wondered if he was, at last, experiencing transhuman dread for himself.

They fought their way towards the centre of the hall, where a great bio-stasis generator stack rose like a temple altar, gilded and covered with angelic figures. The glass-packed bodies radiated out from it, stack upon suspended stack. Huge white statues, demi-gods shrouded in long capes, bright as snow, knelt in obeisance before the central block.

The silvered-black armour of the Iron Hands warrior gleamed like slicked oil in the Precinct's weird light. His blade moved like a ribbon of light. Aximand got around the expert guard, and delivered a glancing blow with his hilt that cracked the chest plating of Henricos's wargear. Henricos responded by planting his feet, locking their blades in a rigid cruciform, and shoulder-barging Aximand.

Little Horus lurched backwards and crashed into the nearest row of cybernators. Glass sleeves shattered, and showers of fragments flew up and caught the light like spring petals. Cybernation tubes cannoned into one another, cracking and disintegrating. Some were pushed clear of the gravimetric support fields and fell, smashing on the polished metal floor. Power relays shorted out. Desiccated bodies tumbled out into the air like bundles of roots and twigs.

Bion Henricos crunched over broken glass and dry bones to get at Aximand. He shoved suspended glass sleeves out of his way. There was a bitter stink of resins and preserving spices. Aximand struggled to get up. Flickers of energy, dark and unhealthy, were flaring like troubled synapses out from the disrupted area of the Mausolytic array. The coloured bursts writhed and fired out into the serene, golden layers of the undamaged structure. Odd harmonics, like the low moaning of a thousand voices relayed by a low quality vox signal, filled the hall.

Henricos reached Aximand. *Mourn-it-all* cut him across the eyes, shattering one lens unit, and raked a gouge down his stomach and hip. Henricos struck with a swing that would have severed Aximand's head if he had been a hand-span closer. He drove the Medusan warleader back across the carpet of ancient, pulverised glass and mummified scraps. His next blow wounded Henricos in the thigh. Something silvery, like liquid mercury, sobbed out.

Henricos put him on the ground. Aximand wasn't quite sure how he'd been hit, but the impact rattled his brain inside his skull and filled his mouth and nostrils with blood. He was face down, groping for his fallen sword, concussed and dazed and vulnerable.

He looked up, wondering why Henricos hadn't finished him. Amindaza of Tithonus was locking swords with his opponent. Amindaza had fought his way into the Hall, and Geraddon wasn't far behind. The loud and repeated discharge of weapons from outside the entry space suggested that the assault had washed into the main area of the Precinct, and that the Compulsories were in retreat.

Amindaza had been wounded on his way into the Hall, and his arm was slow. His arrival and interception had saved Aximand, but it had also doomed Amindaza. Henricos was a far superior swordsman. Before Aximand, dazed and spitting blood, could get back up, Henricos had delivered a blow that split Amindaza from his left shoulder to his right hip. He was simply bisected, diagonally, in one stroke. The sections of him fell hard, messily, in an apocalyptic release of blood.

Geraddon flew at him, and Henricos knocked him aside. Geraddon smashed into another row of caskets.

Aximand put *Mourn-it-all* through Henricos's spine so that the tip shattered the aquila on the Medusan's breastplate.

Henricos fell to one knee, and then onto his face. Aximand knelt on his back and cut his helmet off. Henricos's pale face was turned to the side, cheek to the floor, the white skin flecked with beads of dark red blood.

'Pray this death takes you, traitor,' said Aximand. 'Other deaths would be less forgiving.'

Henricos gurgled something.

'What?' asked Aximand, pressing his blade against the neck of the Iron Hands warleader.

'You are not the trophy we hoped for,' Henricos whispered.

'Trophy?'

'Knew we couldn't beat you, wanted to hurt you instead. Thought... thought he would value the Mausolytic Precinct above all, and lead this segment attack personally.'

'This was supposed to be a trap for Lupercal?'

'May he burn forever.'

Aximand laughed.

'But your master is a coward and a traitor,' murmured Henricos, 'and all he sends is you.'

'It would appear I'm quite enough,' replied Aximand. 'What did you hope to do?'

Henricos gurgled.

'I said, what kind of trap is one flesh-spare warrior?'

Henricos did not reply. All the life had drained out of him.

Aximand rose, and kicked the corpse.

Geraddon had got back up.

'What was he saying?' he asked.

'Nonsense,' Aximand replied. 'Simply nonsense. He was desperate.'

'It was supposed to be a trap,' said Geraddon, 'so why was he alone?'

The sound of breathing had come back. Aximand turned slowly and realised that it was simply the background noise of the Mausolytic Hall, the slow, throbbing murmur of the cybernation system. It was the pulse of the sleeping dead.

He felt like a fool. When the operation was over, he would meditate. He would clean his mind of the fears and dreams that had accumulated. He would purify his thoughts and expel his weaknesses. To serve the Warmaster, he needed to be an even-tempered weapon.

He had let himself slacken. It was time he recommitted his mind and made himself truer to the image of Lupercal.

Aximand opened the vox, and took stock. Large portions of the Precinct were in Sixteenth Legion hands. Grael Noctua reported the West Hall and the approaches secure. Aximand ordered squads forward into the East Hall, to his position. He ordered all access ways closed.

He looked at the cybernation array around them. A little damage had been done, but not too much. The facility was essentially intact, and a little pressure applied to Dweller technadepts would soon have repairs completed.

The huge white statues of shrouded demi-gods, bright as snow, that had been kneeling in obeisance around the central great bio-stasis generator stack were gone.

'Wait–' Aximand began.

The White Scars killteam rushed them. The five killers of the Fifth Legion had thrown off the white cloaks they had used for concealment. They had used chalk dust or some funereal powder to mask the crimson edges of their armour. Their helms were crowskull, the Corvus pattern. It seemed Lev Goshen had been badly mistaken. The White Scars *did* have the patience to wait. What on the open field was fast hit and run became, in city fighting, stealth and swift ambush.

Grael Noctua's warning had been shrewd.

The first one was on him. It was Hibou Khan. Aximand identified him from his rank and company pins. This was the practice of *burkutchi*, to 'cut the head'. The term came from the Chogorisian art of hunting with eagles, the great *akwilluh*, using the birds to draw out and isolate the bull leader of a herd. Once the bull was dead, the herd was broken.

It had been their intention to decapitate the Sixteenth. Thwarted, they were going to make do with other prey: other bulls, junior bulls, company captains.

Aximand smashed Hibou away, and broke the White Scar's blade on *Mourn-it-all's* edge. Another Scar lunged in. Aximand parried and heard Geraddon cry out as two blades punched through him. Aximand drove his sword down through the cap of the next snow-white crowskull helm that came at him. Suddenly, not all the red decorating the White Scar wargear was scarlet lacquer. He reached for his bolter.

Gunfire ripped through the Mausolytic Precinct. More White Scars and renegade Iron Hands had sprung their trap. Squads of Aximand's company were meeting both, bolter to bolter. Fighting on, out-numbered, Aximand slew another White Scar, blasting his bolter point-blank through an eyeslit. He yelled over the link to Noctua and his lieutenant captains to close the fight down.

To be on alert that their enemy was hunting captains as trophies.

To be aware that they weren't facing Tyjunate Compulsories or Chainveil anymore.

They were facing Adeptus Astartes transhumans.

Hibou Khan had got back on his feet. To replace his own, broken sword, the White Scar had snatched up the long blade of Medusan steel that Henricos had wielded. His first blow notched *Mourn-it-all*, his second beat Aximand's guard.

His third blow caught Little Horus vertically at the cheek, in a line that began just over the right eye-piece where his Mournival mark was displayed. The bonded ceramite of his helm didn't even seem to stop the Medusan weapon.

Aximand fell. There was a great deal of blood suddenly, and he couldn't properly account for its source. He saw something on the etched steel floor in front of him.

It was the visor and snout section of his own helmet, the entire faceplate. It had been sheared off, peeled cleanly away, as though shaved by an industrial slicer.

And it was not empty.

The reattachment left a scar. It set the character of the face differently, altered the seating of the muscles. Somehow, the wrongness, the imperfection, made him more like Horus, not less.

Noctua brought his squads into the East Hall in a rapid counterstrike, and broke the *burkutchi.* Hibou Khan was denied the opportunity to finish the job. Most of the loyalist Space Marines were driven back out into the lap of Lev Goshen and his Terminator squads.

Hibou Khan fled, leaving twelve men of Aximand's company dead by his own hand, and earning himself a place on Aximand's death list.

A new helm was forged for him, with the half-moon above the right eye. The armourers were already busy graving Mournival marks to the helms of Grael Noctua and Falkus Kibre. When Aximand was shown the pieces of his old headgear, he saw that the blade had sliced his half-moon mark in half.

Had he been a man prone to superstition and belief in omens, he might have read bad things into this. But he was not afraid of change. He was not really even a man.

Under the surgeon's knife, in stasis sleep, he had dreamt one final dream. The identity of the faceless intruder had ultimately been revealed. Aximand had been slightly apprehensive that the intruder's face would turn out to be his own, or one just like it, and that lengthy psychological work would be required as a consequence.

It was not. As they restored his face, he dreamt the face of the other.

It was the face of Garviel Loken.

When Aximand woke, he felt a measure of happiness and relief. A man could not be afraid of the dead, and Loken was dead, and

that fact would not change.

Not that he was afraid of change. Change was, he always insisted, part of his ruling character.

‘The melancholic humour is protean,’ he said. ‘It possesses the quality of autumn. It is transformative. It makes me the accelerator of death, the enabler of ends and beginnings. I was made to clear away this world ready for renewal. To change the order of things. To cast out the false and enthrone the true. This is my purpose. I am not afraid.’

Then again, once they reattached his face, all he ever really looked was invincible.

The Iron Within

Rob Sanders

The iron within. The iron without. Iron everywhere. The galaxy laced with its cold promise. Did you know that Holy Terra is mostly iron? Our Olympian home world, also. Most habitable planets and moons are. The truth is we are an Imperium of iron. Dying stars burn hearts of iron; while the heavy metal cores of burgeoning worlds generate fields that shelter life – sometimes human life – from the razing glare of such stellar ancients.

Empires are measured in more than just conquered dirt. Every Iron Warrior knows this. They're measured in hearts that beat in common purpose, thundering in unison across the void: measured in the blood that spills from our Legiones Astartes bodies, red with iron and defiance. This is the iron within and we can taste its metallic tang when an enemy blade or bullet finds us wanting. Then the iron within becomes the iron without, as it did on what we only now understand to be the first day of the Great Siege of Lesser Damantyne…

The Warsmith stepped out onto the observation platform, each of his power-armoured footfalls an assault on the heavy grille. The Iron Warrior's ceramite shoulders were hunched with responsibility, as though the Space Marine carried much more than the deadweight of his Mark-III plate. He crossed the platform with the determination of a demigod, but the fashion in which his studded gauntlets seized the exterior rail betrayed a belief that he might not make the expanse at all. The juggernaut ground to an irresistible halt.

A rasping cough wracked the depths of his armoured chest, his form rising and falling with the exertion of each tortured, uncertain breath. Imperial Army sentries from the Ninth-Ward Angeloi Adamantiphracts watched the Warsmith suffer, uncertain how to act. One even broke ranks and approached, the flared muzzle of his heavy carbine lowered and scalemail glove outstretched.

'My lord,' the masked soldier began, 'can I send for your Apothecary or perhaps the Iron Palatine…'

Lord Barabas Dantioch stopped the Adamantiphract with an outstretched gauntlet of his own. As the Warsmith fought the coughing fit and his convulsions, the armoured palm became a single finger.

Then, without even looking at the soldier, the huge Legiones Astartes managed: 'As you were, wardsman.'

The soldier retreated and a light breeze rippled through the Iron Warrior's tattered cloak, the material a shredded mosaic of black and yellow chevrons. It whipped about the statuesque magnificence of his power armour, the dull lustre of his Legion's plate pitted with rust and premature age, lending the suit a sepia sheen. He wore no helmet. Face and skull were enclosed in an iron mask, crafted by the Warsmith himself. The faceplate was a work of brutal beauty, an interpretation of the Legion's mark, the iron mask symbol that adorned his shoulder. Lord Dantioch's mask was a hangdog leer of leaden fortitude with a cage for a mouth and eyes of grim darkness. It was whispered in the arcades and on the battlements that the Warsmith was wearing the mask – pulled glowing from the forge – as he hammered it to shape around his shaven skull. He then plunged head and iron into ice water, fixing the beaten metal in place forever around his equally grim features.

Gripping the platform rail, Dantioch drew his eye-slits skywards between his hunched, massive shoulders and drank in the insane genius of his creation. The Schadenhold: an impregnable fortress of unique and deadly design, named in honour of the misery that Dantioch and his Iron Warriors might observe if ever an enemy force was foolish enough to assault the stronghold. During the process of Compliance, as part of the Emperor's strategy and holy decree, thousands of bastions and citadels had been built on thousands of worlds, so that the architects of the Great Crusade might watch over their conquered domain and the new subjects of an ever expanding Imperium. Many of these galactic redoubts, castles and forts had been designed and built by Dantioch's Iron Warrior brothers: the IV Legion was peerless in the art of siege warfare, both as besiegers and the besieged. The galaxy had seen nothing like the Schadenhold, however – of that Dantioch was sure.

Under his mask the Iron Warrior commander's pale lips mumbled the Unbreakable Litany. 'Lord Emperor, make me an instrument of your adamance. Where darkness is legion, bless our walls with cold disdain; where foolish foes are frail, have our ranks advance; where there is mortal doubt, let resolution reign…'

The Warsmith had blessed the Schadenhold with every modern structural fortification: concentric hornworks; bunkers; murder zones; drum keeps; artillery emplacements and kill-towers. The fortress was a monstrous study in 30th Millennium siegecraft. For Dantioch, however, location was everything. Without the natural advantages of material, elevation and environment, all other architectural concerns were mere flourish. A stronghold built in a strategically weak location was certain to fall, as many of Dantioch's kindred in the other Legions had discovered during the early trials of Compliance. Even the Imperial Fists had had their failures.

Dantioch had hated Lesser Damantyne from the moment he had set foot on the dread rock and had felt instantly that the planet hated him also. It was as though the world did not want him there and that appealed to the Warsmith's tactical sensibilities: he could use Damantyne's environmental hostilities to his advantage. The small planetoid was situated in a crowded debris field of spinning rock, metal and ice that made it seem unfinished and hazardous from the start. The cruisers of the 51st Expedition that had brought the Warsmith and

his Iron Warriors there had negotiated the field with difficulty. Although the planet had tolerable gravity and low-lying oxygen that made an outpost possible, the surface was a swirling hellstorm of hurricane winds, lashing lightning and highly corrosive, acid cloud cover. Nothing lived there: nothing could live on the surface. The acidic atmosphere ate armour and ordnance like a hungry beast, rapidly stripping it away layer by layer in an effort to dissolve the flesh and soft tissue of the Legiones Astartes beneath. Even the most heavily armoured could only expect to survive mere minutes on the surface.

This made vertical, high-speed insertions by Stormbird the sole way down and that was only if the pilot was skilful enough to punch through the blinding cloud cover and down into one of the narrow, bottomless sinkholes that punctuated the rocky surface. Through some natural perversity of Damantyne's early evolution, the planetary crust was riddled with air pockets, cavities and vast open spaces: a cavern system of staggering proportion and labyrinthine madness. Dantioch chose the very heart of this madness as the perfect location for his fortress, in a vaulted subterranean space so colossal it had its own primitive weather system.

'From iron cometh strength. From strength cometh will. From will cometh faith. From faith cometh honour. From honour cometh iron. This is the Unbreakable Litany. May it forever be so. *Dominum imperator ac ferrum aeturnum.*'

The Iron Warriors were not the first to have made Lesser Damantyne their home. Below the surface, the lithic world was rich with life which had evolved in the deep and the dark. The only real threat to the Emperor's chosen were the megacephalopods: monsters that stalked the caverns with their sinuous tentacles and could collapse their rubbery bulk through the most torturous of cave tunnels, creating new entrances with their titanium beaks. The Legiones Astartes, first few years on Lesser Damantyne comprised a war of extermination on the xenos brutes, who seemed intent on tearing down any structures the IV Legion attempted to erect.

With the alien threat hunted to extinction, Dantioch began construction on his greatest work: the Schadenhold. While Iron Warriors had been battling chthonic monstrosities for planetary supremacy, Dantioch had had his Apothecaries and Adeptus Mechanicum advisors hard at work creating the muscle that would build his mega-fortress. Iron Warrior laboratories perfected genestock slave soldiers, colloquially known as the Sons of Dantioch. Although the Warsmith's face had been hidden for many years behind the iron of his impassive mask, it was plain to see on the gruesome hulks that had built the Schadenhold.

Taller and broader than a Space Marine, the genebreeds used the raw power of their monstrous bulk to mine, move and carve the stone from which the fortress was crafted. As well as physical prowess the slave soldiers had also inherited some of their gene-father's cold, technical skill and the Schadenhold was more than a hastily constructed rock edifice: it was an enormous example of strategic art and siegecraft. With the fortress complete, the Sons of Dantioch found new roles in the maintenance and basic operation of the citadel and as close-quarters shock troops for the concentric kill zones that layered the stronghold. It pleased the ailing Warsmith to be surrounded by brute examples of his own diminished youth and physical supremacy and, in turn, the slave soldiers honoured their gene-father with a simple, unshakable faith and loyalty: a fealty to the Emperor as father of the primarch and the primarch as father of their own.

'I never tire of looking at it,' a voice cut through the darkness behind. It was Zygmund Tarrasch, the Schadenhold's Iron Palatine. Dantioch grunted, bringing an end to his mumbled devotions. Perhaps the Adamantiphract had sent for him; or perhaps the Iron Palatine had news.

The Space Marine joined his Warsmith at the rail and peered up at the magnificence of the fortress above. Although Dantioch was Warsmith and ranking Legiones Astartes among the thirty-strong Iron Warrior garrison left behind by the 51st Expeditionary Fleet, his condition had forced him to devolve responsibility for the fortress and its day-to-day defence to another. He'd chosen Tarrasch as Iron Palatine because he was a Space Marine of character and imagination. The cold logic of the IV Legion had served the Iron Warriors well but, even among their number, there were those whose contribution to Compliance was more than just a conqueror's thirst – those who appreciated the beauty of human endeavour and achievement, not just the tactical satisfaction of victory and the hot delight of battle.

'Reminds me of the night sky,' Tarrasch told his Warsmith. The Iron Palatine nodded to himself. 'I miss the sky.'

Dantioch had never really thought of the Schadenhold in that way before. It was certainly a spectacle to behold and the final facet in the Warsmith's ingenious design, for the two Iron Warriors were standing on a circular observation platform, situated around the steeple-point of the tallest of the Schadenhold's citadel towers. Only, the tower did not point towards the sky or even at the cavern ceiling: it pointed down at the cavern floor.

The Schadenhold had been hewn out of a gigantic, conical rock formation protruding from the roof of the cave. Dantioch had immediately appreciated the rock feature's potential and committed his troops to the difficult and perilous task of carving out an inverse citadel. This hung upside-down, but all chambers, stairwells and interior architecture were oriented skywards. The communications spires and steeple-scanners at the very bottom of the fortress were hanging several thousand metres above a vast naturally-occurring lake of crude promethium, which bubbled up from the planet depths. At the very top of the stronghold were the dungeons and oubliettes, situated high in the cavern roof.

As Dantioch cast his weary eyes up the architecture, he came to appreciate the comparison the Iron Palatine was making. In the bleak darkness of the gargantuan cavern, the bright glare of the fortress searchlamps and soft pinpricks of illumination escaping the embrasure murder holes appeared like a constellation in a deep night sky. This was accentuated further by the phosphorescent patches of bacteria that feasted on the feldspar in the cavern roof and the dull glints reflecting off the shiny, pitch surface of oozing promethium below: each giving the appearance of ever more distant stars and galaxies.

'You have news?' Dantioch put to Tarrasch.

'Yes, Warsmith,' the Iron Palatine reported. The Space Marine was also in full armour and Legion colours, bar gauntlets and helmet, which he clutched in one arm. The vigilance (or paranoia, as some of the other Legions believed) of the Iron Warriors was well known

and the Schadenhold and its garrison maintained a constant state of battle readiness. Tarrasch ran a hand across the top of his bald head. His dark eyes and flesh were the primarch's own, a blessing to his sons. As the Warsmith turned and the light of the observation platform penetrated the slits of his iron mask, Tarrasch caught a glimpse of sallow, bloodshot eyes and wrinkled skin, discoloured with age.

'And?'

'The flagship *Benthos* hails us, my lord.'

'So, the 51st Expedition returns,' Dantioch rasped. 'We've had them on our relay scopes for days. Why the slow approach? Why no contact?'

'They inform us that they've had difficulty traversing the debris field,' the Iron Palatine reported.

'And they hail us only now?' Dantioch returned crabbily.

'The *Benthos* accidentally struck one of our orbital mines,' Tarrasch informed his master. Dantioch felt something like a smile curl behind the caged mouth of his faceplate.

'An ominous beginning to their visit,' the Warsmith said.

'They're holding station while they make repairs,' the Iron Palatine added. 'And they're requesting coordinates for a high speed insertion.'

'Who requests them?'

'Warsmith Krendl, my lord.'

'Warsmith Krendl?'

Tarrasch nodded: 'So it would appear.'

'So Idriss Krendl now commands the 14th Grand Company.'

'Even under your command,' Tarrasch said, 'he was little more than raw ambition in polished ceramite.'

'You might just get your night sky, my Iron Palatine.'

'You think we might be rejoining the Legion, sir?'

For the longest time, Dantioch did not speak – the Warsmith lost in memory and musing. 'I sincerely hope not,' the Warsmith replied.

The answer seemed to vex the Iron Palatine. Dantioch laid a gauntleted hand on Tarrasch's shoulder. 'Send the *Benthos* coordinates for the Orphic Gate and have two of our Stormbirds waiting near the surface to escort our guests in.'

'The Orphic Gate, sir? Surely the–'

'Let's treat the new Warsmith to some of the more dramatic depths and cave systems,' Dantioch said. 'A scenic route, if you will.'

'As you wish, my lord.'

'In the meantime have Chaplain Zhnev, Colonel Kruishank, Venerable Vastopol and the cleric visiting from Greater Damantyne meet us in the Grand Reclusiam: we shall receive our guests there and hear from Olympian lips what our brothers have been doing in our absence…'

The Grand Reclusiam rang with both the wretched coughing of the Warsmith and the hammer strokes of his Chaplain. The chamber could easily accommodate the thirty-Iron Warrior garrison of the Schadenhold and their cult ceremonies and rituals. In reality – with the fortress in a state of constant high alert – there were ordinarily never more than ten Legiones Astartes in attendance during any one watch.

Dantioch and his Chaplain had not allowed such a restriction to affect the design and impact of the chamber. The Iron Warriors on Lesser Damantyne were few in number but great of heart and they filled their chests with a soaring faith and loyalty to their Emperor. To this end the Grand Reclusiam was the largest chamber in the fortress, able in fact to serve the spiritual needs of ten times their number. From the vaulted stone ceiling hung a black forest of iron rods that dangled in the air above the centrum altar approach. These magnified the cult devotions, rogational and choral chanting of the small garrison to a booming majesty – all supported by the roar of the ceremonial forge at the elevated head of the chamber and the rhythmic strikes of hammer on iron against the anvil-altar.

The aisles on either side of the centrum consisted of a sculptured scene that ran the length of the Grand Reclusiam, rising with the flight of altar steps and terminating at the far wall. Towering above the chamber congregation, it depicted a crowded, uphill battle scene crafted from purest ferrum, with Iron Warrior heroes storming a barbaric enemy force that was holding the higher ground. The primitive giants were the titans and personifications of old: the bastions of myth and superstition, smashed upon the armour and IV Legion's virtues of technology and reason. As well as serving as an inspiring diorama, the sculpture created the illusion that the congregation was at the heart of the battle – and there was nowhere else Dantioch's men would rather be.

Beyond the sculpture on either side, the rocky walls of the chamber had been lined with polished iron sheeting, upon which engraved schematics and structural designs overlapped to create a fresco of the Emperor looking on proudly from the west and the Primarch Perturabo from the east.

'My lord, they approach,' Tarrasch announced and with difficulty the Warsmith came up off one devout knee. Shadows and the sound of self-important steps filled the Reclusiam's grand arch entrance. The Iron Palatine turned and stood by his Warsmith's side, while Colonel Kruishank of the Ninth-Ward Angeloi Adamantiphracts hovered nearby in full dress uniform. His reverential beatings complete, Chaplain Zhnev uncoupled the relic-hammer from a slender, bionic replacement for his right arm and shoulder. He handed the crozius arcanum attachment to a hulking genestock slave whose responsibility it was to keep the ceremonial forge roaring. Zhnev made his solemn way down the steps, nodding to the only member of the congregation who was not part of the Schadenhold garrison: a cleric

dressed in outlandish, hooded robes of sapphire and gold.

'They come,' Zhnev murmured as the delegation marched into his Reclusiam and up the long approach to the altar steps.

Out front strode Idriss Krendl, the new Warsmith of the 14th Grand Company. The intensity of his Olympian glower was shattered by the scarring that cut up his face. Following, clad in the crimson robes of the Adeptus Mechanicum, was an adept, whose own face was lost to the darkness of his hood. A sickly yellow light emanated from three bionic oculars that rotated like the objective lenses of a microscope. Beside him was a Son of Horus. The eyes on his shoulderplate and chest were unmistakable and his fine armour was of the palest green, framed in a midnight trim. His unsmiling face was swarthy and heavy of brow, as though in constant deliberation. Flanking them, and marching in time, were Krendl's honour guard: a four-point escort of Legiones Astartes veterans in gleaming, grey Mark-IV Maximus suits lined in gold and gaudiness.

'Warsmith,' Krendl greeted his former master coolly, at the foot of the altar steps.

A moment passed under the engraved eyes of the Emperor.

'Krendl,' Dantioch replied.

The Iron Warrior pursed his mangled lips but let the failure to acknowledge his new rank pass. 'Greetings from the 51st Expedition. May I introduce Adept Grachuss and Captain Hasdrubal Serapis of the Sons of Horus.'

Dantioch failed to acknowledge them also. The Warsmith gave a short cough and waved a gauntlet nonchalantly behind him.

'You know my people,' Dantioch said. Then added, 'and yours.'

'Indeed,' Krendl said, raising a ragged eyebrow. 'We bring you new orders from your primarch and your Warmaster.'

'And what of the Emperor's orders? You bring nothing across the stars from him?' Dantioch asked.

Krendl stiffened, then seemed to relax. He gave Serapis a glance over his armoured shoulder but the captain's expression didn't change.

'It has long been the Emperor's wish that his favoured sons – under the supreme leadership of his most favoured, Horus Lupercal – guide the Great Crusade to its inevitable conclusion. Out here, amongst a cosmos conquered, the Warmaster's word is law. Dantioch, you know this.'

'Out here, in the darkness of the East, we hear disturbing rumours of this cosmos conquered and the dangers of the direction it is taking,' Dantioch hissed. 'Rector, come forth. You may speak.'

The cleric in sapphire and gold stepped forwards with apologetic hesitation. 'This man,' Dantioch explained, 'has come to us from Greater Damantyne with grave news.'

The priest, at once scrutinised by the supermen, retreated into the depths of his hood. He fumbled his first words, before gaining his confidence.

'My lords, I am your humble servant,' the rector began. 'This system is the terminus of a little-known trade route. Merchants and pirates, both alien and human, run wares between our hinterspace and the galactic core. In the last few months they have brought terrible news of consequence to the Emperor's Angels here on Lesser Damantyne. A civil war that burns across the Imperium, the loss of entire Legions of Space Marines and the unthinkable – a son of the Emperor slain! This tragic intelligence alone would have been enough to bring me here: the Space Marines of this rock have long been our friends and allies in the battle with the green invader. Then, a dread piece of cognisance came to my ears and made them bleed for my Iron Warrior overlords. Olympia – their home world – the victim of rebellion and retribution. A planet razed to its rocky foundations; mountains aflame and a people enthralled. Olympia, I am heartbroken to report, is now no more than an underworld of chain and darkness, buried in rotten bodies and shame.'

'I have heard enough of this,' Serapis warned.

Krendl turned on the Warsmith. 'Your primarch–'

Dantioch cut him off. 'My primarch – I suspect – had a hand in these reported tragedies.'

'You waste our time, Dantioch,' Krendl said, his torn lips snarling around the hard consonants of the Warsmith's name. 'You and your men have been reassigned. Your custodianship here is ended. Your primarch and the Iron Warriors Legion fight for Horus Lupercal now and all available troops and resources – including those formally under your superintendence – are required for the Warmaster's march on ancient Terra.'

The Grand Reclusiam echoed with Krendl's fierce honesty. For a moment nobody spoke, the shock of hearing such bold heresy in a holy place overwhelming the chamber.

'End this madness!' Chaplain Zhnev implored from the steps, the forge light flashing off his sable-silver plate.

'Krendl, think about what you're doing,' Tarrasch added.

'I am Warsmith now, *Captain* Tarrasch!' Krendl exploded, 'whatever rank you might hold in this benighted place, you will honour me with my rightful title.'

'Honour what?' Dantioch said. 'The rewards of failure? You command simply because you lack the courage to be loyal.'

'Don't talk to me about failure and lack of courage, Dantioch. You excel in both,' Krendl spat. He bobbed his head at Serapis, the splinters of frag still embedded in his face-flesh glinting in the chamber light. 'That is how the great Barabas Dantioch came to be left guarding such a worthless deadrock. Lord Perturabo's favourite here came to lose Krak Fiorina, Stratopolae and the fortress world of Gholghis to the Vulpa Straits hrud migration.'

As Krendl growled his narrative, Dantioch remembered the last, dark days on Gholghis. The hrud xenos filth. The infestation of the unseen. The waiting and the dying, as Dantioch's garrison turned to dust and bones, their armour rusting, bolters jamming and fortress crumbling about them. Only then, after the intense entropic field created by the migratory hrud swarms had aged stone and flesh to ruin,

did the rachidian beasts creep out of every nook and crevice to attack, stabbing and slicing with their venomous claws.

Most of all, Dantioch remembered waiting for the Stormbird to lift the survivors out of the remains of Gholghis: Sergeant Zolan, Vastopol the warrior-poet and Techmarine Tavarre. Zolan's hearts stopped beating aboard the Stormbird, minutes after extraction. Tavarre died of old age in the cruiser infirmary, just before reaching Lesser Damantyne. Vastopol and the Warsmith had considered themselves comparatively fortunate but both had been left crippled with their aged, superhuman bodies.

'He then thought it wise,' Krendl continued with acidic disdain, 'to question his primarch's prosecution of the hrud extermination campaign. No doubt as a way to excuse his loss of half a Grand Company, rather than laying the blame where it really belonged: the Emperor's bungled attempt at galactic conquest and his own failed part in that. The IV Legion spread out across the stars. A myriad of tiny garrisons holding a tattered Compliance together in the wake of a blind Crusade. Our once proud Iron Warriors, reduced to planetary turnkeys.'

'The primarch was wrong,' Dantioch said, shaking his iron mask. 'The extermination campaign prompted the migration rather than ending it. Perturabo claims the hrud cleansed from the galaxy but, if that is the case, what is quietly wiping out Compliance worlds on the Koranado Drift?'

The new Warsmith ignored him.

'You disappoint and disgust him,' Krendl told Dantioch. 'Your own primarch. Your weakness offends him. Your vulnerability is an affront to his genetic heritage. We all have scars but it is you he cannot bear to look upon. Is that why you adopted the mask?' Krendl smiled his derision. 'Pathetic. You're an insult to nature and the laws that govern the galaxy: the strong survive; the feeble die away. Why did you not crawl off and die, Dantioch? Why hang on, haunting the rest of us like a bad memory?'

'If I'm so objectionable, what is it that you and the primarch want with me?'

'Nothing, cripple. I doubt you would live long enough to reach the rendezvous. Perturabo demands his Iron Warriors – all his true sons – for the Warmaster's offensive. Horus will take us to the very walls of the Imperial Palace, where the Emperor's fanciful fortifications will be put to the test of our mettle and history will be made.'

'The Emperor has long grown distracted in his studies on ancient Terra,' Hasdrubal Serapis insisted with venom. 'The Imperium has no need of the councils, polity and bureaucracy he has created in his reclusion. We need leadership: a Great Crusade of meaning and purpose. The Emperor is no longer worthy to guide humanity in the next stage of its natural dominion over the galaxy. His son, Horus Lupercal, *has* proved himself worthy of the task.'

'Warsmith Krendl,' Zhnev said, blanking out the Son of Horus and taking several dangerous steps forwards. 'If you stand by and do nothing, while the Warmaster plots patricide and pours poison in his brother primarch's ears, then you too plot a patricide of your own. Perturabo is our primarch. We must make our noble lord see the error of his judgement – not reinforce it with our unquestioned compliance.'

'Lord Perturabo is your primarch, indeed. Is it so difficult to obey your primarch's order?' Serapis marvelled at the Iron Warriors. 'Or does mutinous Olympian blood still burn in your veins? Krendl, to have your home world rebel in your absence is embarrassment enough. I trust you will not allow the same to happen amongst members of your own Legion.'

'Save it, pontificator,' Krendl snapped at the Chaplain. 'I have heard the arguments. Soon the Legion will have little use for you and your kind.' The Warsmith turned on the silent, seething Dantioch. 'You will surrender command of this fortress and troops to me immediately.'

A moment of cool fury passed between the two Iron Warriors.

'And if I refuse?'

'Then you and your men will be treated as traitors to the primarch and his Warmaster,' Krendl promised.

'Like you and your Cthonian friend are to his majesty, the Emperor?'

'Your stronghold will be pounded to dust and traitors with it,' Krendl told him.

Dantioch turned and presented the grim iron of his masked face to Colonel Kruishank, Chaplain Zhnev and his Iron Palatine, Zygmund Tarrasch. Their faces were equally grim. Allowing his eyes to linger for a second on the visiting rector, Barabas Dantioch returned his gaze to his maniacal opposite. Krendl was flushed with fear and fire. Serapis merely watched: a distant observer – the puppet master with strings of his own. Adept Grachuss gurgled rhythmically and rotated his tri-ocular, the lens zeroing in on Dantioch. The Warsmith's honour guard stood as statues: their bolters ready; their barrels on the custodians of the Schadenhold.

'Vastopol,' Dantioch called. 'What do you think?'

A vox-roar boomed around the chamber, causing the iron rods suspended above the Reclusiam to tremble and dance. Something large and ungainly moved amongst the giant, iron sculptures of the aisle diorama. The most primitive of preservation instincts caused Krendl and his honour guard to spin around in shock. One of the sculptures had come to life. Seeming small in the choreographed throng of titan attackers, the assailant's bulk and breadth swiftly grew as it advanced and towered over the astounded Iron Warriors.

The Legiones Astartes were presented with one of their own. A Dreadnought. A brooding, metal monster, as broad as it was tall and squatset with chunky weaponry. The Venerable Vastopol: with his Warsmith, the last surviving Iron Warriors of the Gholghis fortress world. Wracked with horrendous injury and premature age, Dantioch had had the Space Marine entombed in Dreadnought armour, so that the warrior might continue to serve and keep the chronicles of the company alive. The war machine had been hastily sprayed black in order to blend in with the surrounding diorama and with movement the fresh paint left a black drizzle behind the beast.

As the wall of ceramite and adamantium came at them, Krendl's armed escorts tried to bring their bolters to bear. The Venerable Vastopol's gaping twin-autocannons were already loaded, primed and aimed right at them. The weapons crashed, chugging explosive fire

at the two rearguard Space Marines and filling the chamber with the unbearable cacophony of battle. At such close range, the heavy weapon reduced the two Legiones Astartes to thrashing blurs of blood and shattered armour.

With more grace and coordination than would have been thought possible in the hulking machine, the charging Dreadnought turned and smashed a third Iron Warrior guard into the opposite aisle with a power claw-appendaged shoulder. The Space Marine's glorious Maximus suit crumpled and the Legiones Astartes within could be heard screaming as bones snapped and organs ruptured. With Krendl and Serapis backing for cover, silent pistols drawn, and the Mechanicum adept knocked to the Reclusiam floor, the Warsmith's remaining honour guard flung himself at the Dreadnought. Lifting his bolter above his head, the Iron Warrior blasted the Venerable Vastopol's armoured womb-tomb with firepower.

Sparks showered from the Dreadnought's adamantium shell. Vastopol gunned the chainfist bayonet that underslung his autocannons. Slashing at the Iron Warrior with the barbed nightmare, the war machine chewed up the Space Marine's weapon before opening up his armour from the jaw to the navel. With chest cavity and abdomen spilling their contents out through the ragged gash, the honour guard dropped to his knees and died. Having come away from the wall of sculpture, the Dreadnought had allowed the crushed Legiones Astartes he'd pinned to the merciless iron to thunk to the ground. Lifting a huge metal foot, Vastopol stamped down on the Iron Warrior's helmet, bespattering the polished stone with brain matter and putting the mauled Space marine out of his howling misery.

As Dantioch came forwards, flanked by Tarrasch and Zhnev on one side and the rector and colonel on the other, Krendl and the Son of Horus retreated: the rage and horror evident on their contorted faces. Both Legiones Astartes officers were backing step by step towards the Grand Reclusiam entrance, their pistols aimed at the unarmed Warsmith and his heavily-armed Dreadnought. Krendl and Serapis were politicians, however, and knew that their best chance of escaping the fortress alive lay in their threats rather than their pistols.

The Venerable Vastopol plucked Grachuss from the floor with the chisel-point digits of his power claw, holding the Mechanicum adept by the temples and hooded crown like an infant's doll. The sickly yellow lens of the tech-priest's tri-ocular revolved in panic while his respiratory pipes bubbled furiously.

'I fear Warsmith Krendl brought you with instructions to catalogue our fortifications,' Dantioch addressed the suspended Grachuss, 'so that you might return with stories of our siege capability. A greater Warsmith than he would have done that himself, of course. Vastopol here was the chronicler for our company: he's not much of a talker now. Vastopol,' Dantioch called. 'How does Adept Grachuss's story end?'

The Dreadnought's power claw attachment began to revolve at the wrist, wrenching the tech-priest's hooded head clean from his spinning shoulders. His body struck the altar steps, a cocktail of blood and ichor pumping from the ragged neck stump.

'Insanity!' Krendl bawled at the advancing Dantioch. 'You're dead!' The threats had begun.

'*Captain* Krendl,' Dantioch hissed. 'This is an Iron Warrior stronghold. It does not, nor will it ever serve the renegade Warmaster. My garrison and I are loyal to the Emperor: we will not share in your damnation.' The cold pride that afflicted the Legion, as well as their Iron father, glinted in Dantioch's cloudy eyes. 'It seems I have one last opportunity to prove my worthiness to the primarch. I will not fail him this time. The Schadenhold will never fall. Do you hear me, Idriss? This stronghold and the men that defend it will never be yours. The Iron Warriors on Lesser Damantyne fight for their Emperor and they fight for me. You will taste failure and it will be your turn to return to the primarch's wrath. Now run, you cur. Back to your renegade fleet and take this heretic dog with you.'

Stepping back through the archway of the Grand Reclusiam with a wary Serapis, the wide-eyed Krendl thrust his pistol behind him and then back at the Iron Warriors and their Dreadnought.

'All of this,' Krendl waved the muzzle of the bolt pistol around, 'dust in a day. You hear, Dantioch? Dust in a day!'

'I dare you to try,' Dantioch roared, but his challenge dissolved into raucous coughing. As the Warsmith fell to his armoured knees with wheezing exertion, Tarrasch grabbed Dantioch's arm. Patting the Iron Palatine's ceramite, the Warsmith caught his breath. Tarrasch let him go but the exhausted Iron Warrior commander remained kneeling and head bowed. Slowly he turned to the hooded rector.

'So,' the cleric said, 'you hear it for yourself: straight from traitor lips. Our brothers' hearts steeped in warped treason.' The rector reached inside the rich material of his robes. The soft whine of the displacer field – all but imperceptible before – died down through the frequencies, unmasking the priest and revealing his true dimensions. As the cleric lowered his hood the reality about the huge figure fell out of focus for a moment before reassuming a searing clarity.

Their minds unclouded, the Schadenholders beheld a brother Space Marine: his ornate plate of the deepest blue. He held a plumed helmet under one arm and an ornate gladius sat in a sheath across his thigh. His surcoat robes hung from the resplendent flourishes of his artificer armour, with battle honours and commendations dripping from his glorious plate. The symbol on his right shoulder identified him as an Ultramarine; the bejewelled Crux Aureas crafted into his left as Legionary Champion, Tetrarch of Ultramar and Honour Guard to Roboute Guilliman himself.

'You played your part well, Tetrarch Nicodemus. Are the Ultramarines usually given to such theatricality?' Dantioch asked.

'No, my lord. We are not,' the champion answered, his cropped hair and fair patrician looks the mark of Ultramar's warrior elite. 'But these are uncommon times and they call for tactics uncommon.'

'Let me be candid, Ultramarine. When you arrived on Lesser Damantyne with your slurs and distant intelligence, I almost had Vastopol blow *you* from the Schadenhold's battlements.' The Warsmith came up from his knees, once again with the help of Tarrasch. The Tetrarch shot him hard eyes: one of which was encircled by a neat tattoo of his chapter symbol.

'It is not easy for an Iron Warrior to hear of his brothers' weakness,' Dantioch continued. 'In that, even Idriss Krendl and I agree. You slandered my father primarch and besmirched the IV Legion with accusations of rebellion, heresy and murder. We've allowed your

insults to go unpunished; you've allowed us the luxury of hearing kindred treason first hand. Our accord is sealed in truth. What now would Roboute Guilliman have of us?'

Tauro Nicodemus looked about the gathering. Tarrasch and Zhnev's bleak pride matched their Warsmith's own; the Venerable Vastopol existed only to fight and Colonel Kruishank's default loyalty was plain to see on his face – allegiance to the Emperor offering him solace in the face of calamity.

'Nothing you haven't freely given already,' Nicodemus insisted. 'Deny the Warmaster resource and reinforcement. Hold your ground for as long as you can. The efforts of a faithful few could slow the traitor advance. Minutes. Days. Months. Anything, to give the Emperor time to fortify Terra for the coming storm and for my lord to cut through the confusion Horus has sown and prepare a loyalist response.'

'If we are to give ourselves for this, level Iron Warrior against Iron Warrior, then it would be good to know that Guilliman has a strategy,' said Dantioch.

'Yes, my lord. As always, Lord Guilliman has a plan,' the Ultramarine champion told him evenly.

As the congregation went to leave the blood-spattered Grand Reclusiam, Dantioch asked, 'Nicodemus?'

'Yes, Warsmith?'

'Why me?'

'Lord Guilliman knows of your art and expertise in the field of siegecraft. He suspects these skills will be sorely needed.'

'He could count on my skill but what of my loyalty?' Dantioch pressed. 'After all, my Legion has been found wanting in its faith.'

'You spoke candidly before, my lord. Might I be allowed to do the same?'

Dantioch nodded.

'The Warmaster could exploit the weakness of your primarch's pride,' the Tetrarch explained cautiously. 'Your history with Perturabo is no secret. Lord Guilliman feels he too can rely on this same weakness in you.'

Once again, the Warsmith nodded. To Nicodemus and to himself.

I was there. On that tiny world, in a forgotten system, in a distant corner of the galaxy: where a mighty blow was struck against the renegade Warmaster and his alliance of the lost and damned. There, on Lesser Damantyne. I was among the few, who stood against many. The brother who spilled his brothers' blood. The son who betrayed his wayward father's word. And that word was… heresy.

For a bloody day beyond an Ancient Terran year we fought. Olympians all. Iron Warriors answering the call of their primarch and Emperor. The cold eyes of both watching from afar. Judging. Expecting. Willing their Iron Warriors on like absentee gods drawn to mortal plight by the reek of battle: the unmistakable stench of blood and burning.

I was there when Warsmith Krendl visited upon us a swarm of Stormbirds. Disgorged from the fat cruiser *Benthos* and heavily-laden with troops and ordnance, the aircraft blotted out the stars and fell upon our world like a flock of winged thunderbolts. Blasting through the thick cloud of Damantyne's hostile surface, the Stormbirds would have rocketed through the cave systems and disgorged their own brand of horror on our readying position. Warsmith Dantioch had ordered the Orphic Gate collapsed mere hours before, however, and all the flock found there was rock and destruction, as, one after another, they struck the planet surface.

I was there when the mighty god-machines of the Legio Argentum, denied entrance to the gate also, had to stride through the acid hellstorms of Lesser Damantyne. Like blind, tormented behemoths they tumbled and crashed through the squalls and cyclones, their armoured shells rust-riddled and giant automotive systems eaten away. The infamous *Omnia Victrum*, the sunderer of a hundred worlds, was one of three flash-flayed war machines that managed to stumble to a sinkhole colossal enough to admit their dimensions. And there the screaming hordes that crewed the god-machines were confronted with the unfathomable labyrinth of the planet's gargantuan cave system and the reality that they might be lost for eternity in the deep and the dark.

I was there when Warsmith Dantioch ordered the giant ground-pumps to life and the lake of crude promethium burst its banks, flooding the floor of our huge cavern-home with a raging, black ichor. I watched as the Nadir-Maru 4th Juntarians and more bombardment cannon than a man could count were drowned in a deluge of oil and death. I roared my dismay as columns of my traitor brethren marched on the pumps through the settling shallows, to sabotage the great machinery. I roared my delight when my Warsmith ordered the slick surface of the crude promethium ignited about them. A blaze so bright that it not only roasted the Iron Warriors within their plate but brought light to the cavern that the depths had never known.

I was on the Schadenhold's battlements as our own cannon and artillery placements reduced Warsmith Krendl's reserve Stormbirds to fireballs of wreckage. I saw the small armies they landed on our keeps and towers fall to their deaths like rain from our inverse architecture. I fought with the Sons of Dantioch – genebred hulks of monstrous proportion – as they tore Nadir-Maru 4th Juntarians limb from limb in the kill zones and courtyards. I walked amongst Colonel Kruishank's Ninth-Ward Angeloi Adamantiphracts as their disciplined las-fire lit up the ramparts and cut their traitor opposites to smouldering shreds. I looked down on a fortress swamped in carnage, where you could not walk for bodies and could not breathe for the blood that lay hanging in the air like a murderous fog.

Finally, I fought in the tight corridors and dread architecture of the Warsmith's design. Took life on an obscene scale, face-to-face with my Iron Warrior brethren. Murdered in the Emperor's name and matched the cold certainty of my brothers' desire. Killed with the same chill logic and fire in my belly as my enemy had for me. Measured my might in the blood of traitors whose might should have measured my own. I was there. In the Schadenhold. On Lesser Damantyne. Where few stood against many and, amongst the fratricidal nightmare of battle, brothers bled and heresy found its form.

The Schadenhold shook.

Dust rained from the low ceiling and grit danced on the dungeon floor. The subterranean blockhouse seared with gunfire. Its hoarse boom split the ear and the flash of hot muzzles dazzled the eye. Barabas Dantioch had supreme confidence in his nightmare stronghold's design. He'd told Idriss Krendl that the Schadenhold would never be his. Even at this stage – three hundred and sixty-six Ancient Terran days into the murderous siege – he could count on the fortress keeping his word. With traitor Titans and Mechanicum war machines haunting the caverns, swarms of Stormbirds strafing the citadel towers and enemy Legiones Astartes storming its helter-skelter battlements, he knew the brute logic of the Schadenhold's design and the rock from which that inexorability had been crafted would not let him down. Dantioch's tactical genius extended far beyond the unrelenting architecture of the stronghold exterior: any Warsmith worth their rocksalt, regardless of the boasts they might make, planned for the inevitability of failure. A life lived under siege had taught the Iron Warriors that enemies were not to be underestimated and that all fortresses fall – sooner or later. A Warsmith's gift was to make this eventuality as late as possible. The blockhouse was a perfect example of the principle in action.

Throughout the citadel, on every level and in every quarter, there was a blockhouse chamber. A fallback position for the Iron Warrior garrison within: each bolthole was equipped with its own secreted supplies of food, water and ammunition, as well as rudimentary medical and communications equipment. The chambers themselves were dens of devious geography, every one with its own unique design and layout. No lethal opportunity had been left unexploited and every fire arc and angle had been measured to perfection. In each the Warsmith had created a crenellated deathtrap of chokepoints, hide sites and killspots that doubled as training facilities for the Legiones Astartes warriors during the simpler, silent times of peace.

The blockhouses had not only provided Dantioch's hard-pressed garrison with respite and supplies but had also frustrated any hopes Warsmith Krendl might have had of a swift victory, once his invading force had breached the citadel's considerable, exterior defences. Fighting inside the Schadenhold had been as bloody as the slaughter on the battlements beyond. The fortress stank of hot metal and swift death. Every wall was a bolt-hammered vista of splatter and gore, every chamber carpeted with armoured bodies.

Kneeling down on one rusted knee, Dantioch mused over a crumpled, blood-spotted pile of schematics. The Schadenhold diagrams covered the floor of the embrasure platform and were stained and scratched with ink, Dantioch's strategic annotations almost obscuring the detail of the stronghold's grand design. About the Warsmith, armoured feet shuffled and the air sang with the relentless crash of firing mechanisms. Nearby slumped an Angeloi Adamantiphact, breathing through a ragged hole in his chest, while another bled away his life as an Imperial Army chirurgeon fussed over his missing arm. The edges of the schemata vellum soaked up the growing pool, but the Warsmith – feathered quill to the mouth grate of his mask – was so involved in his three-dimensional visualisation of the two-dimensional prints, that he barely noticed.

'Have Squad Secundus fall back to the hold point on the floor above, they're about to be cut off,' Dantioch ordered.

While Adamantiphracts lanced the long corridor approach to the blockhouse with broad-beam las-fire from the flared barrels of their carbines, the ranking Angeloi Adamantiphact officer in the blockhouse – Lieutenant Cristofori – carried a useless, mangled arm in a sling and doubled as Dantioch's tactical and communications dispatch. Operating a small but robust vox-bank, set in the embrasure wall, Cristofori was the Warsmith's eyes and ears about the Schadenhold. While the lieutenant conveyed the order through a bulky vox-receiver, he filtered the flood of reports coming in from the vox-links of individual Iron Warriors and the comms stations of different blockhouses. Replacing the receiver, he put a finger to his headset and nodded.

'Sir, Nine-Thirteen reports enemy reinforcements on the hangar deck,' the lieutenant relayed.

'Legiones Astartes?' Dantioch asked. It would be hard to believe. If the bodies were anything to go by, Krendl must have committed a full demi-Grand Company by now. The Schadenhold was swarming with Perturabo's progeny.

'Imperial Army, my lord. Looks like foot contingents of the Bi-Nyssal Equerries.'

Dantioch allowed himself a hidden smile. New blood. It seemed that Krendl had been reinforced. This both pleased and vexed the Warsmith. Krendl had been sent to acquire reinforcements for the primarch and Horus Lupercal, not expend the Warmaster's valuable manpower. That would be embarrassing enough. The problem with reinforcement was that it meant that Krendl had been outfitted to see the siege through to the end. Horus could not allow word of Lesser Damantyne's resistance and the loyalty of the Iron Warriors to reach other Legions. The end was near.

'Nine-Thirteen have been forced back to the fuel depot. Awaiting orders,' Cristofori added.

Dantioch grunted. 'Tell the ranking wardsman that he has permission to use the Nine-Thirteen's remaining detonators on the promethium tanks.' The Warsmith slashed a cross through the Schadenhold's Stormbird hangars on the floor schematic. 'We won't be needing them. Let's deny our enemy also. Nine-Thirteen can fall back by squads to this maintenance opening,' he continued, stabbing the quill point through the vellum. 'Then on to Sergeant Asquetal in the North-IV blockhouse.'

'Sir, also – blockhouses South-II and East-III report dwindling supplies of ammunition.'

'Collapse all of our people on levels two and three back to Colonel Kruishank's hold point in the Hub,' Dantioch grizzled above the gunfire.

'The colonel's dead, sir.'

'What?'

'Colonel Kruishank is dead, sir.'

'Then Captain Galliop, damn it! They still have some limited supplies.'

'Yes, my lord,' Cristofori said unfazed and began relating the Warsmith's orders.

This had been the order of things for as long as the Schadenholders could remember: battle coordinated a hair's breadth under the

fury of boltfire. Whereas the elevated embrasure was intended to provide space for such luxury, below on the chamber floor, Iron Warriors, Adamantiphracts and gene-stock ogres fought with adrenaline-fuelled frenzy. Each knew that his life depended upon the relentless taking of others and nowhere was this more evident than at the gauntlet-entrance to the blockhouse. The walls about the opening had lost their angularity and harsh edges. The perpetual assault of bolt-rounds and las-fire had chewed up the stone and returned the entrance to the rocky, cavernous irregularity of the cave system beyond. From the ceiling rained the gore of those who had failed to breach the chamber; the floor underneath was a mound of gunfire-shredded bodies and trampled armour.

At the centre of the blockhouse stood the Venerable Vastopol. The Dreadnought was too large to take advantage of much of the architectural cover and instead had stood its ground like a machine possessed, hammering anything advancing with the glowing barrels of its raging autocannons. The war machine had borne the brunt of the blockhouse defence; however, the reinforced plate of its sarcophagus body was a sizzling, bolt-punctured mess. The monstrous machine stood in a pool of its own hydraulic fluid and showered sparks from one of its clunky legs. The muzzle of its lower cannon barrel had been shorn off and the mangled chainfist bayonet below hung in a serrated tangle. About the Dreadnought, firing from loopholes and crescent alcoves in merlon walls, were its superhuman kindred. Experts in the art of encumbrance, the Legiones Astartes prided themselves on their beleaguered worth: every defending Iron Warrior had to slay so many of his traitor brothers in order to satisfy the Warsmith's equations: algebraic notations calculated in time and blood.

'Missile launcher!' Tarrasch yelled from the chamber floor. As Legiones Astartes and Adamantiphracts retracted barrels and slammed their backs into protective scenery, the warhead rocketed up the passage and into the blockhouse. Striking a merlon wall the missile exploded, showering razor frag across the heads of hidden defenders.

Angeloi Adamantiphract marksmanship seared the length of the approach, hammering the plate of storming Iron Warriors and cutting up their Imperial Army opposites, las-fodder from the Expeditionary Fleet's Nadir-Maru 4th Juntarians. Those that made the gauntlet-entrance faced a storm of their own: disciplined, ammunition-conserving blasts from the barrels of garrison battle-brothers. Armoured Legiones Astartes besiegers who breached the chamber dived out of the path of withering autocannon fire and las-streams and peeled off left and right, desperate for cover. Their desire to establish a foothold in the blockhouse took them straight into the reach of the Iron Palatine and his assault troops.

The Sons of Dantioch, scarred genebred hulks, pumped to obscenity with hormones and fervent loyalty, came at the interlopers with the mammoth tools of their trade – diamantine-tip hammers, serrated shovels and clawpicks. If that wasn't enough of a nightmare for the blockhouse breachers, the Iron Palatine, Chaplain Zhnev and the Ultramarine Tauro Nicodemus were leading the charge.

An Iron Warrior invader broke from a cannon-mauled throng, a yellow and black-striped blur. With his Mark-IV plate alive with ricochets, the brute pushed himself away from one wall and then the other before tumbling into a messy roll. He was followed by two other traitors who blazed away with their bolters and a trail of opportunistic Nadir-Maru 4th Juntarians.

Genebred hulks descended upon the spearheading Space Marine, their picks and shovels sparking off his savaged ceramite. The second turned his wild bolter straight on Nicodemus, the azure glint of the Ultramarine's armour instantly attracting the warrior's attention. Zhnev wasted no time with the third, firing the pistons in his replacement shoulder. His hammer-fashioned crozius arcanum swung through the air in an unpredictable, pendula-jointed arc, crashing past the Iron Warrior's helmet. Cleaving through armour plating and bone where the Space Marine's neck met his shoulder, the Iron Warrior Chaplain fired his pistons again, swiftly retracting the sacred relic. Spinning with the pendula motion of the crozius, Zhnev howled his fury before striking the heretic's helmet from his body.

Tarrasch plugged the resulting bloodhaze with alternate rounds from each of his bolt pistols, cutting down the Nadir-Maru troopers streaming in through the gauntlet-entrance. Dark, shiny faces beneath extravagant turbans bared bleach-white teeth at the Iron Palatine. The former Iron Warrior captain barked directions to the Angeloi Adamantiphract warriors at the embrasure walls and the Sons of Dantioch below to bring down the Juntarians in their own inimical ways.

With an enemy Legiones Astartes pounding across the killing ground at him, Brother Nicodemus of Ultramar took several practice sweeps with the gleaming blade of his gladius. On his other arm he supported the weight of a huge storm shield. The shield was as tall as the Ultramarine – a sub-rectangular plate, the curved, semi-cylindrical surface of which crackled with a protective energy field. The champion clutched it to his side like an airlock bulkhead.

Dantioch's Iron Warriors were savage hand to hand fighters – equals of the unstoppable World Eaters or the Blood Angels' loyal fervour. The Iron Warriors were deadlier still when they were cornered: cold machines of dread and determination. None had the martial grace or unadulterated skill with a blade that Nicodemus exhibited. Nicodemus batted the Iron Warrior's bolter aside with the weight of the sizzling shield before shearing through the weapon with a murderous downwards cut of his gladius. Before the dazed Iron Warrior could snatch a hammer from his belt the Ultramarine had flashed the gladius back and forth across his opponent's armour. The blade sang through the Iron Warrior's chestplate and helmet, spraying the chamber with Olympian blood.

Nearby the Space Marine that had spearheaded the daring assault broke free of the geneslave mob. A chainaxe screamed from the scrum of hulking bodies. The Iron Warrior burst from the prison of muscular flesh, sweeping heads and elephantine limbs from the Sons of Dantioch in his path. Chaplain Zhnev's crozius sang through the air on its pendula attachment, smashing the motorised axehead into pieces. The Iron Warrior responded immediately by plunging his gauntlet into a holster and drawing a bolt pistol. Before he could end the Chaplain, Tarrasch hammered the heretic with a feverish hail of bolts from his own pistols. The angle was hastily improvised and no one round found its way through the Maximus suit plating. The onslaught had cut the Space Marine's escape dead, however, and the genestock hulks – hungry for a rematch – seized the Iron Warrior. One monster got a bulging arm around the Legiones Astartes's armoured neck while two others snatched an arm each. The ogres gave a brutal heave on the traitor's limbs and with a sickening crack

and sudden release, the suit seals and the body within tore apart.

On the opposite side of the gauntlet-entrance the ogres' genestock brothers were murdering Nadir-Maru Juntarians with equal delight. As las-fusillades and dark faces parted, two more armoured figures were revealed. Their armour was busy with chevron designs and yellow striping, and on their backs – either side of their suit packs – were a pair of brass promethium canisters. Stomping up through the Juntarians, the Iron Warriors presented their chunky nozzles, the scorched, dribbling muzzle of each weapon situated at the end of a long firepole.

Tarrasch turned to the blockhouse with just two words on his thin lips: 'Take cover!'

The blast wave from the erupting inferno knocked the Iron Palatine from his armoured feet. In the confines of the chamber, the heavy flamers did their worst. Everything became roasting heat and smoke, the ink-blot obscurity punctuated by blinding streams of pressurised promethium. As gouts of destruction felt their fiery way through the defensive architecture, sound and smell dominated. Above the boom of the Iron Warrior firepoles, the chatter of bolters could still be heard. Above this was the strangled shrieking of men aflame: Angeloi, genebreeds and Nadir-Maruvians all. Scorched within their suits, Iron Warriors stumbled through the firestorm, searching for respite.

It could have been a bolt-round, fired blindly into the darkness and fury, or perhaps a stream from the flared muzzle of a lascarbine or laspistol. Most likely it was a blast from the Venerable Vastopol's raging autocannons, but something hit one of the brass fuel canisters. A succession of explosions rippled through the thick smoke, knocking all that still lived in the chamber onto their backs. Flame rolled across ceiling and floor; through the tactical arrangement of the blockhouse; through the gauntlet entrance and down the crowded passage beyond.

Dantioch's gauntlet grabbed the top of the platform wall like a grapnel. The Warsmith heaved himself to unsteady feet in the swirling smoke, stamping out the small fire that was his burning schematics. Cristofori was dead, as well as the injured Adamantiphract and his chirurgeon. As the smoke began to clear, Dantioch took in the blockhouse floor. There were bodies everywhere, both loyal and traitor: a carpet of scorched armour and charred flesh. Similar destruction extended up the passage to the gauntlet entrance. There was movement, however, and it wouldn't take their attackers long to organise an assault to capitalise on the inferno.

Leaning against the wall for support, the Warsmith came down the embrasure steps.

'Tarrasch!' Dantioch called. From the soot and smaze came sudden movement.

'Sir,' came the Iron Palatine's reply. The explosion had knocked the Iron Warrior senseless into a wall. His words were shaky but the Space Marine was alive.

'It's over. We are compromised. Enemy forces imminent. Get the living to their feet.'

'Yes, my lord.'

As Tarrasch stumbled through the carnage, searching for survivors, Dantioch ran his gauntlets along the wall. The Warsmith began to knock experimentally against the stone as he slouched along its expanse. Satisfied, the Warsmith stopped and turned on the hulking Dreadnought that still stood sentinel in the middle of the blockhouse, autocannons at the ready.

'Vastopol, are you still with us, my friend?' the Warsmith asked.

In answer the Dreadnought just burned. The explosions had done little to the machine but scorch its adamantium and set fire to the scrolls, banners and decorative flourishes that adorned the bulky form.

'Don't be like that,' Dantioch said. 'It's over. We could fight to the last man but what would that achieve?'

Still the Dreadnought stood immobile.

'This isn't Gholghis,' Dantioch told his battle-brother. 'It is the prerogative of the Warsmith when to war and when not to. We are beaten here. It is time to take the war elsewhere. Now get over here and help me; you may still have a story to tell.'

As the Venerable Vastopol dragged its mangled and sparking leg across the bodies of the blockhouse floor, Tarrasch worked his way through the dead and dying. The Angeloi were all dead, as were the remaining Sons of Dantioch. The raging inferno had done for both and only a handful of Legiones Astartes, protected from the worst of the explosion by their battle-plate, had survived the catastrophic accident.

'Enemy advancing!' Tarrasch called from the gauntlet entrance.

'Come on, come on!' Dantioch urged Space Marines emerging from the smoke and destruction.

Tauro Nicodemus was suddenly beside him: his immaculate armour soot-stained and blood-spattered.

'I thought this was the fallback position,' the Tetrarch said. The Ultramarine had accepted that he was to die there, taking as many traitor lives with him as he was able.

'Game's not over,' Dantioch said. 'Gather your weapons.'

'Where are we going?'

'Through this wall.'

Dantioch knocked on a section of the blockhouse wall. A deliberate, architectural weak point. 'Vastopol.'

The Dreadnought limped at the wall, crashing through the masonry with one of its chunky shoulders. Rock and dust fell about the war machine. Extracting itself from the ragged aperture, Vastopol stood back to admit the surviving Legiones Astartes: the Warsmith, the Iron Palatine, Brother-Sergeant Ingoldt, Brothers Toledo and Baubistra, the Ultramarine Nicodemus and Chaplain Zhnev. Beyond a broad set of steep, rocky stairs extended, running parallel with the wall and reaching up into the Schadenhold's cavernous ceiling foundations. With the Legiones Astartes striding up ahead, the Venerable Vastopol negotiated the steps with difficulty, its mangled leg a handicap on the shambling ascent.

The stairwell rumbled and shook.

'What was that?' Tarrasch called. For a moment nobody answered in the darkness. Then a quake rolled through the stone about them. The steps shook under their feet and fractures split the stairwell's rough roof and walls.

'It's the *Omnia Victrum*,' Dantioch said. 'Krendl finally has his Titans in position.' The Warsmith tried to picture the acid-scarred colossi outside, the remaining war machines of the Legio Argentum. The *Omnia Victrum* was an Imperator-class Titan. A mountain of rust-eaten armour, striding across the cavern like a vengeful god. At its sides it mounted weaponry of titanic proportion: monstrous instruments of destruction, capable of razing cities and felling enemy god-machines. Upon its hunched back sat a small city of its own: a Titanscape of corroded steeples, towers and platforms. A base of operations and a mobile barracks of waiting reinforcements.

'She's softening up the south face of the Schadenhold with her cannons and turbolasers before landing troops.' The Imperator was huge and certainly tall enough to stand beside and beneath the Iron Warrior citadel. It could disgorge a siege-ending horde of traitor Iron Warriors and reinforcement foot contingents of the Bi-Nyssal Equerries. As fresh blood rampaged through the south section of the Schadenhold, joining Krendl and his depleted forces in the north, loyalist Iron Warrior resistance would be overrun and crushed. Even Dantioch's ingenious blockhouse fallbacks would not be able to save the Schadenholders from the wall-to-wall carnage that was to come.

Tremors swept through the stairwell once more, knocking several Space Marines from their footing. Dantioch fell into Tarrasch, who steadied his Warsmith, but most were staring at the ceiling. Rock and dust rained down on the Iron Warriors and the walls trembled.

'The passage is collapsing,' Nicodemus called, holding his storm shield above him.

'The structure will hold,' Dantioch assured them. They were in the cavern ceiling foundations of the Schadenhold. The *Omnia Victrum*'s artillery assault was pummelling the citadel into submission, shaking the fortress to its rocky core. From the bottom of the stairwell came the fresh chatter of weaponry. Bolters and lascarbines, clutched by the traitor Legiones Astartes and Nadir-Maru 4th Juntarians. The enemy that had flooded the empty blockhouse had followed them through the hole in the wall. Firepower came up the stairs at the loyalists with Krendl's besiegers climbing behind. 'Come on!' Dantioch shouted and continued his ascent.

'Warsmith,' he heard Tarrasch call and upon turning found his Iron Palatine skidding back down the steps towards the Venerable Vastopol. Although the south wall had held, it had partially collapsed, creating a bottleneck through which the Dreadnought's broad bulk could not pass. With his armoured shoulders askew but braced between the walls of the stairwell, the war machine was trapped: held fast by the rock and unable to find footing with his mangled leg.

Enemy fire hammered into the Dreadnought's armoured back. Brother-Sergeant Ingoldt and the Iron Palatine grabbed the war machine's limbs and heaved at the metal monster. With the intensity of firepower beyond growing and casting the Venerable Vastopol in silhouette, the Iron Warriors fought to free their comrade. The Dreadnought's vox-speakers trembled with the groans of the warrior inside, as the relentless streams of las-fire and bolt-rounds shredded Vastopol's rear plating.

Baubistra and Chaplain Zhnev ran down the steps at the war machine. Brother Baubistra leapt onto the front of the sarcophagus body section and clambered up the chunky weaponry. Between the top of the Dreadnought's mighty shoulders and the stairwell roof, Baubistra found a gap for his bolter and began answering back with ammo-conserving blasts. Zhnev came straight at Vastopol's midriff, slamming his battle-plate into the Dreadnought in the hope that his assault might dislodge the war machine. The Chaplain failed. The Venerable Vastopol had become the immovable object. Only the unstoppable force of Krendl's traitor troops would remove him and until then, the Iron Warrior Dreadnought became a wall of adamantium and ceramite dividing the two.

Tarrasch heard a familiar whine.

'Missile launcher!' he called.

A rocket slammed into the back of the Dreadnought, knocking Baubistra from his perch and drawing from the Venerable Vastopol a vox-roar of agony and anguish. Two more followed, ravaging the armoured shell of the beast. Vastopol's groans were constant now and the Iron Warrior's hulking, metal body was failing about him. Dantioch stomped down the steps towards the Dreadnought.

'Get him out,' the Warsmith ordered.

'He'll die,' Zhnev replied over the boom of battle beyond.

'Do it.'

Tarrasch looked to Dantioch and his Chaplain. Then up to Tauro Nicodemus, who was waiting further up the stairwell.

'My lord,' Tarrasch said, 'we need specialist tools and Magos Genetor Urqhart for such a procedure.'

Dantioch laid his gauntlets on the cold metal of the Venerable Vastopol's sarcophagus section. The Iron Warrior within continued to moan his agonies through the vox-speakers.

'Vastopol, listen to me,' the Warsmith said. 'We won't leave you, my friend. We need to get you out. Can you help us?'

The Dreadnought's power claw came up slowly between them. Askew as he was, the war machine still had use of the appendage, but little else. Bringing the clawtips together like a spike, the Dreadnought thrust the weapon through the armour plating of his sarcophagus. Magna-pistons and hydraulics shifted and locked in the appendage, opening the claw within. With a mighty heave the arm retracted. The Dreadnought's armoured body fought back, resisting the act of self-mutilation, but finally the plate tore away from the machine's pock-marked shell.

Amnio-sarcophagal fluid cascaded from the pod within, splashing the steps and nearby Space Marines. Power arced across the ruined section and the cavity steamed. The stench was overpowering. Small fires had broken out within, while lines and wires smoked and sparked. Interred, like an ancient foetus, lay what remained of the former Brother Vastopol. The warrior-poet was barely alive. His parchment skin was both wrinkled and pruned and his arms skeletal and wasted. He'd long lost his legs and his torso was a scrawny

cage of bones, infested with life-support tubes and impulse plugs that ran lines between the aged Legiones Astartes and his metal womb-tomb.

'Get him out,' Dantioch ordered.

Chaplain Zhnev and Brother Toledo pulled the emaciated Iron Warrior from the sarcophagus, extracting tubes from between his withered lips and yellow teeth and unplugging the pilot from his mind-impulse interface with his shattered Dreadnought body. With his arms draped over ceramite shoulders, the two Iron Warriors carried Vastopol between them, his skullface and wet, threadbare scalp resting against the Chaplain's plate.

More missiles struck the barricade of the Dreadnought's evacuated shell and the Iron Warriors fled up the rocky stairwell. Despite being exhausted from the siege the Space Marines made swift progress, slowed only by the fragility of Vastopol's failing condition and the hacking cough that paralysed the Warsmith with infuriating regularity. At the top of the stairwell they encountered an iron hatch set in the passage roof. Making his feeble way up the final few steps, Dantioch ordered the hatch unlocked and the Iron Warriors through.

The chamber beyond was large and dark. The Warsmith pulled down on a robust handle set in the stone of the wall and lamps began to flicker on. The still air about the Legiones Astartes came to life with the rumble of powerful generators.

'Seal it,' Dantioch told Brother Baubistra, indicating the hatch. Striding across the chamber, Dantioch was followed by questions. The chamber was no blockhouse, although it did seem to house a small armoury of its own: bolters on racks, ammunition crates, grenades and several suits of Mark-III plate. The Warsmith ignored his brothers' enquiries and fell to work at a nearby runebank. 'Sergeant Ingoldt, Brother Toledo, please be so good as to clad the Venerable Vastopol in one of those suits of spare plate.'

'That won't save him,' Zhnev informed his Warsmith.

'Chaplain, please. While there's still time.'

'Warsmith, I must press you for an explanation,' Tauro Nicodemus said, after casting his eyes about the chamber. 'I thought we were falling back to a further hold point.'

'To what end, Ultramarine?' Dantioch put to him as his gauntlets glided over the glyphs and runes of the console. 'The Schadenhold is lost. Those loyalists remaining in the citadel will be overrun by Krendl's reinforcements and the *Omnia Victrum* will reduce the rest to rubble. This stronghold has bought the Emperor and Roboute Guilliman three hundred and sixty-six Ancient Terran days. Three hundred and sixty-six days bought with Olympian blood, so that they might formulate a response to the Heresy and better fortify the Imperial Palace – to buy a more favourable outcome than our own.'

'What is the plan, my lord?' Tarrasch said, his words giving shape to the thoughts of all in the chamber.

Dantioch looked about their cavernous surroundings.

'This is the last of the Schadenhold's secret strategies,' the Warsmith said. 'A final solution to any siege and an answer to any enemy that might push us this far.'

'You said the fortress was lost,' Nicodemus said.

'There are many moments in a battle, when we can exploit our enemy's weakness. We have, over the course of this siege, exploited nearly all of them. It is nothing less than irony that an enemy is at its very weakest mere moments before victory: when they are at their most stretched and committed in seeking such success. We are going to capitalise on that now.'

'How?' the champion pressed him.

'In a siege, finalities must come first. We must accept our eventual doom and prepare for its coming. This chamber was one of the first I had constructed when crafting the Schadenhold. It is situated in the cavern ceiling, right in the rocky foundations of the fortress. It houses two important pieces of equipment, linked by a common console: a trigger for both if you will. The first is a small teleportarium with the associated generators required to power such a piece of equipment. The second is a detonator: wired to explosives situated at key weak points in the citadel foundations. Gravity will do the rest.' Dantioch let the enormity of his plan sink in. 'Chaplain Zhnev, please begin the rites for teleportation. Our journey will be swift but our destination important.'

As the Chaplain approached the transference tablets of the teleporter beyond, Tarrasch helped Ingoldt and Toledo get the barely breathing Vastopol sealed in plate.

'Where is that destination?' Nicodemus asked the Warmith. The Ultramarine was unused to being kept in tactical darkness.

'The enemy has committed everything they have to taking this stronghold, undoubtedly leaving their own weak. We are going to teleport to the *Benthos* and take the bridge by surprise and by force. Brothers, time is upon us. Take your positions, please.'

As Tarrasch and the two Iron Warriors dragged the power armoured form of the Venerable Vastopol over to the transference tablets, Nicodemus hefted his storm shield up onto a shoulder mounting. The Ultramarine followed uncertainly.

With his helmet to the hatch, Baubistra said: 'I think they've broken through, Warsmith. The enemy are approaching.'

'Very good, Brother Baubistra: now join your brethren.'

As Baubistra strode by, Dantioch went through the motions of arming the explosives sunk deep in the ceiling rock of the Schadenhold's foundations. Then he opened channels on all floors and vox-hailers across the citadel.

'Idriss Krendl,' Dantioch hissed. 'Captain, this is your Warsmith. I know that you are there, somewhere in *my* fortress. I know you keep company with traitors and stand in the shadow of the Collegia Titanica's god-machines. Faced with such odds, I am speaking to you for the last time. And I say to you again that this fortress will not serve the interests of our unloving father or his renegade Warmaster. But, Captain, I was wrong when I told you that the Schadenhold would never fall. Idriss, it *will* fall…'

With that the Warsmith locked off the channels and initiated the trigger for both teleporter and detonators. Taking his position amongst Nicodemus and the Iron Warriors on the transference tablets, Dantioch straightened his cloak. Sealing his mask, the Warsmith blinked

about the darkness within and felt the unnatural pull of the warp on his armour. Somewhere in the distance he fancied he heard the first of the detonations: massive explosions, ripping through the strategic weaknesses of the fortress foundations. With his eyes closed and the horrors of teleportation about him, Dantioch imagined what he had always known he could never see.

The fall of the Schadenhold. Its literal fall from the ceiling of the cavern. Trillions of tonnes of rock and devious architecture falling to the rocky floor, taking with it the thousands of traitor Iron Warriors and Imperial soldiers that had secured the Schadenhold's defeat. The fortress's final defiance, issued in gravity, fire and stone: falling and crushing beneath it, in a behemothic mountain of blood and rubble, the mighty *Omnia Victrum* and the colossal god-machines of its undoing.

Unsealing his mask, Dantioch cast his eyes across the flight deck of the flagship *Benthos*. The deck was largely empty; most of the cruiser's Warhawks and Stormbirds had been involved in deployment and aerial attacks on the Schadenhold. The Stormbird around which the Iron Warriors had materialised was pale green and bore symbols and flourishes marking it out as belonging to the Sons of Horus – Hasdrubal Serapis's personal transport.

Tarrasch marched down the Stormbird's ramp carrying a teleport homer. Dantioch had ordered the device secretly planted on the vessel during their meeting with Krendl and the Sons of Horus captain in the Grand Reclusiam.

'How are we going to get to the bridge?' asked Chaplain Zhnev.

'With as little bloodshed as possible,' the Warsmith told him. 'This is the 51st Expedition's flagship. Iron Warriors are a common sight among its decks. Let us be that common sight.'

'What about him?' Tarrasch asked of Tauro Nicodemus. Despite the soot and gore, the brilliance of the Ultramarine's armour still shone through.

'The crew will not question a Legiones Astartes.'

Marching out purposefully across the flight deck, Dantioch was followed by his loyalist compatriots. The Space Marines fought their desire to hold their bolters at the ready, opting for more casual or ceremonial poses. Brother Toledo and Sergeant Ingoldt carried the limp plate of the Venerable Vastopol between them, lending the infiltrators even less the appearance of an attacking force.

There were virtually no Legiones Astartes left aboard the vessel, almost every Iron Warrior being committed to the depths of the planet below. Largely the Space Marines encountered regimental staff and the cruiser's multitudinous crew. Few among these mortals allowed their eyes to linger on the demigods – especially under Krendl's brutal regime – and their passage to the command deck was uneventful. Dantioch's strategy had been so bold and audaciously executed that none aboard the *Benthos*, even for a second, entertained thoughts that they were under attack.

Their silent, uneasy approach to the bridge was shattered by an unexpected klaxon. Bolters came up and the Iron Warriors fell immediately into defensive positions.

'As you were,' Dantioch instructed.

The loyalists could hear the thunder of power armoured boots on the deck ahead. 'We are not discovered. We are not under attack,' Dantioch said. Fighting natural inclination and the brute vulnerability of their situation, the Iron Warriors let their barrels drift back down to the deck. A small contingent of Krendl's 14th Grand Company veterans marched across an intersection in the corridor ahead. As their footfalls faded, Dantioch turned to his own veterans. 'By now,' he told them, 'survivors on Lesser Damantyne will have reported the devastation below, the loss of Krendl, the Warmaster's forces and the *Omnia Victrum*. Whoever is in command will want visual confirmation of such an impossible report. Five fewer brother Legiones Astartes for us to deal with.'

Dantioch turned and marched with confidence up the steps to the bridge, flanked by Brother Baubistra and the Iron Palatine. As the Warsmith reached the top and looked down across the expansive bridge of the *Benthos* he fell into a coughing fit once more: a spasm of hacking convulsions that turned heads and drew attentions.

The bridge of the *Benthos* was a hive of activity, with petty officers and sickly servitors busy at work amongst the labyrinth of runebanks, cogitators and consoles that dominated the command deck. Two Maximus-plated Iron Warriors stood sentry on the bridge arch-egress and Lord Commander Warsang Gabroon of the Nadir-Maru 4th Juntarians stood at conference with turbaned officers of his tactical staff. The Lord Commander stood as Dantioch remembered him, unconsciously twirling the braids of his beard and launching stabbing glares of jaundiced incredulity and disappointment at his inferiors.

At the epicentre of the activity and the destination of all reports, data and information were three Sons of Horus: swarthy Cthonians with superior sneers and knitted brows of insidious cunning. Among their number was one who immediately recognised what all others aboard the *Benthos* had failed to: the threat before them. The enemy Warsmith, Barabas Dantioch.

Baubistra and Tarrasch barged onto the bridge, past their master. Putting the muzzles of their weapons to the temples of the traitor sentries they roared at their Olympian brothers to drop their weapons and fall to their knees. Abandoning their burden, Sergeant Ingoldt and Toledo came forwards with bolters raised and pointed at the Sons of Horus. The two traitors flanking Hasdrubal drew their bolt pistols and activity on the bridge slowed to a raucous stand-off. The traitor captain screamed his disbelief and insistence as Iron Warriors and Sons of Horus held each other in their sights. With the Chaplain kneeling beside the dying Vastopol and Dantioch clutching the archway in his coughing fit, it fell to Tauro Nicodemus to break the deadlock.

The Ultramarine champion strode forwards, the only thing moving on the stricken command deck. Undaunted, Nicodemus marched past an apoplectic Lord Commander Gabroon, who was screaming, 'No shooting on the bridge,' at the warring demigods. Hasdrubal Serapis's face screwed up with rage and confusion. The destruction on Lesser Damantyne and the appearance of Dantioch and his Iron

Warriors on the bridge had been disturbing enough. Now one of Guilliman's sons stood before him: a mysterious Ultramarine who had involved himself in the Warmaster's business and no doubt had something to do with the Iron Warrior resistance on the planet below.

Hasdrubal backed towards one of the great lancet screens that towered above the bridge: the thick glass was the only thing separating the Space Marine captain from the hostile emptiness outside. His two sentinels held their ground, tracking the advancing Nicodemus with their bolt pistols. Hasdrubal looked at the Iron Warriors, with their weapons aimed up the bridge and at him in front of the huge window. Gabroon continued to screech his alarm. Hasdrubal nodded, confident that the Iron Warriors were not foolish enough to fire and blast out the viewport, dooming all on the bridge to a voidgrave.

'Kill that damned Ultramarine,' Hasdrubal seethed.

The Sons of Horus fired. Iron Warriors thrust their bolters forwards with an intention to respond in kind.

'Hold your fire!' Dantioch managed between torso-wracking convulsions. With his Iron Warriors facing the bridge lancet screens, he could not afford a stray shot to pierce the hull of the ship.

Nicodemus hefted the mighty storm shield from its shoulder mounting and brought it around just in time to soak up the first of the traitor Space Marine's bolt-rounds. As the shots hammered into the cerulean sheen of the plate, the Tetrarch thumbed the shield's protective field to life. The marksmanship of the Sons of Horus was a beauty to behold. Every bolt-round found its mark, and had Nicodemus not been advancing behind the storm shield he would have been run through by a relentless onslaught of armour-piercing shot.

Closing on the traitors, the pistols' effective range shortened and the storm shield's energy field was breached. One of the adamatium-core Space Marine killers passed through the armour plating and clipped the Ultramarine's shoulder. As Guilliman's champion continued to advance, Hasdrubal's features contorted further in fury and disbelief. The Sons of Horus ejected spent magazines from their sidearms before slamming home another and repeating the treatment. Nothing would stop Nicodemus, however.

As Hasdrubal's Space Marines emptied their weapons for the second time, Nicodemus took a round through the thigh, one in the chest and another in the shoulder. This time the adamantium slugs found their target and punctured holes through the shield and the Ultramarine's artificer armour. The energy field sizzled and spat to overload and all Nicodemus had was the bolt-punched plate between him and his enemies. Running the final stretch of command deck, the Ultramarines champion closed with the Sons of Horus.

Desperate now, the traitors went for their Cthonian blades. Nicodemus already had a gauntlet on his own gladius. His armoured palm was slippery with the blood that had run down his arm from the grievous wound in his shoulder. Spinning between the two Legiones Astartes, Nicodemus slammed the storm shield into the first. He felt the slash of the enemy blade on the battered plate and hammered the Son of Horus again. Extending his arm and moving the shield aside like an open door, the Ultramarine allowed the traitor a single, wild thrust. The sword stabbed through the open space between the champion's elbow and hip. Nicodemus swept down with the blade of the gladius, cutting through the Space Marine's armoured forearm. Gauntlet and blade clattered to the deck.

The Ultramarine pressed his advantage: one honour guard to another. He smacked the traitor senseless with the storm shield, the plate edge dashing his helmet this way and that. Dazed, the Son of Horus slipped in his own gore and hit the deck. Nicodemus buried the toe of one power armoured boot in the traitor's faceplate, rolling him over. Standing over his prone enemy, Nicodemus hovered the bottom edge of the rectangular shield over the Space Marine's throat. He looked to Hasdrubal and his one remaining sentinel, who stood defiantly between the Ultramarine and his master. Nicodemus brought down the weight of the storm shield with a sickening crack. The seal between helmet and suit cracked and the shield edge cut through the traitor's neck.

The Ultramarine's armoured chest heaved up and down with exertion as he took a moment to recover, before hoisting the mighty shield around and running straight at the Son of Horus sentinel. Again, Nicodemus felt the pointless slash of the lighter, Cthonian blade on the bolt-shot plate. This time the Ultramarine didn't stop. He rammed the Son of Horus straight into the thick glass lancet window. Crushed between the observation port and the Ultramarine, the traitor abandoned his weapon and tried to grab the edge of the shield with his ceramite fingertips. Nicodemus smashed him into the glass a second and third time. Finally, the Son of Horus managed to get a grip on the shield – his intention to push the plate aside and get his gauntlets around the Ultramarine's neck.

He never got the chance. Pulling back his gladius, Nicodemus rammed the point of the blade through the back of the storm shield and skewered the Space Marine beyond. There was a gasp. Light. Almost inaudible. Retracting the blade, Nicodemus stepped aside and allowed the shield and Son of Horus to smash to the bridge floor.

Hasdrubal had turned away. Like everyone else on the bridge, the captain had thought that the Ultramarine was going to put the Space Marine straight through the window, crashing thick glass about them and inviting the void inside. The captain looked fearfully at Guilliman's champion. Nicodemus paced up and down in front of him with the gore-smeared gladius held in one gauntlet. He unclipped his helmet and slipped the plumed helm off the back of his head. Gone was the martial grace and patrician calm. Nicodemus spat blood at the deck. A bolt pistol shook in Hasdrubal's gauntlet. Iron Warriors surrounded them both, bolters gaping at the traitor.

'It's over,' Dantioch called, his grim insistence cutting through the cacophony of a bridge in uproar. Hasdrubal turned from the Ultramarine's fury to the cold, foreboding of Dantioch's iron mask. 'You lost,' the Warsmith informed his enemy.

Hasdrubal's bolt pistol tumbled from his ceramite fingers. As Toledo and Sergeant Ingoldt secured the prisoner, Nicodemus sheathed his gladius and limped back up the length of the bridge. Lord Commander Gabroon was still shrieking his protestations. The demigod silenced the officer with a slow finger to his lips.

Nicodemus joined Dantioch on the deck, next to the Venerable Vastopol. The Warsmith had ordered Tarrasch to take command of the bridge. Ingoldt and Toledo had been tasked with securing the traitor Hasdrubal Serapis and preparing him for interrogation. Chaplain Zhnev and Brother Baubistra were assigned to Warsang Gabroon, to ensure that the Lord Commander's remaining troops and the crew

of the *Benthos* accepted the swift and relatively bloodless change of regime and the new orders that accompanied it.

Standing over the two survivors of the Gholghis fortress world, the Ultramarine asked: 'Is there anything I can do, Warsmith?'

Dantioch didn't look at the Tetrarch. The Warsmith's eyes were on the helmetless Vastopol. The ancient lay motionless in battle-plate on the deck, propped up against the wall. The Iron Warrior's grizzled and aged skull was criss-crossed with wisps of white hair and his face lined with premature centuries. Two milky orbs twitched and wandered between Dantioch, Nicodemus and the bridge.

'Our honoured brother is taking his leave,' Dantioch said. His words were hollow and shot through with loneliness and the simple sadness of loss. The Venerable Vastopol had not only survived the dreaded hrud on Gholghis. He'd resisted death's cold invitation and forged on through the agonies of age to be of use to his brothers once more. Untimely ripped from his metal womb, Vastopol had still clung to life. Until now.

'He was our chronicler,' Dantioch said, 'and carried with him our remembered triumphs. Once, on Gholghis, he told me that such stories of the past ground us in the challenge of the present, like a fortification or citadel built upon foundations of ancient rock. I have none of his skill – crafting in iron and stone what he would in words. I live to tell the tale, however, of the Iron Warriors' final victory: the last loyal triumph of the IVth Legion. He would want the story to go on. Alas, his story,' Dantioch said grimly, 'like that of our Legion, is at an end.'

'Warsmith,' Nicodemus began slowly, 'that need not be the case. I assured you once that my Lord Guilliman had a plan. You have executed your part of that plan flawlessly, Iron Warrior. Lord Guilliman still has need of such ingenuity and skill. The Imperium is frail, Dantioch. An Iron Warrior's eye could spot such weakness and the good grace of his hand might make it strong once again.'

'What more would you ask of me?' the Warsmith said.

'To stand shoulder to ceramite shoulder with my Lord Guilliman and help him fortify the Imperial Palace.'

'Fortify the Palace…' Dantioch repeated.

'Yes, Iron Warrior.'

'Perturabo will make us pay for such fantasies.'

'Perhaps,' Nicodemus said solemnly. 'But I believe the genius of your victory today lay in your acceptance that the Schadenhold – for all its indomitable art – would fall. Lord Guilliman shares your vision. Humanity's future lies in such contingency.' The Ultramarine let the enormity of the idea linger.

Dantioch didn't answer. Instead he watched the remaining vestiges of life leave the body of his friend and battle-brother. Vastopol's crusted eyes fluttered before rolling and gently closing, the dry whisper of a dying breath escaping the warrior-poet's lips.

As the Venerable Vastopol faded and left them, he heard Dantioch tell the Ultramarine: 'You talk of the arts of destruction. Perturabo's progeny are unrivalled in these arts: indomitable in battle and peerless in the science of siegecraft. Show me a palace and I'll show you how an Iron Warrior would take it. Then I'll show you how you would stop me. I don't know how long I am for this Imperium, but I promise you this: whatever iron is left within this aged plate, is yours…'

The iron within. The iron without. Iron everywhere. Empires rise and they fall. I have fought the ancient species of the galaxy and my Legiones Astartes brothers will fight on, meeting new threats in dangers as yet unrealised. We are an Imperium of iron and iron is forever. When our flesh is long forgotten, whether victim to the enemy within or the enemy without, iron will live on. Our hives will tumble and our mighty fleets decay. Long after our polished bones have faded to dust on a gentle breeze, our weapons and armour will remain. Remnants of a warlike race: the iron of loyalist and traitor both. In them our story will be told – a cautionary tale to those that follow. Iron cares not for faith or heresy. Iron is forever.

And as our battle-plate, our blades and bolters rot in the sand of some distant world, they will pit and tarnish. Their dull sheen will corrode and crumble. Grey will turn to brown and brown to red. In the quietly rusting scrap of our fallen empire, iron will return to its primordial state, perhaps to be used again by some other foolish race. And though the weakness of my flesh fails me, as the weakness of my brothers' flesh will ultimately fail them, our iron shall live on. For iron is eternal.

From iron cometh strength. From strength cometh will. From will cometh faith. From faith cometh honour. From honour cometh iron. This is the Unbreakable Litany. And may it forever be so.

Savage Weapons

Aaron Dembski-Bowden

'In raising these men to watch over mankind, we have bred a legion of inhumans whose sole purpose is to defend that which they no longer understand. Their duty, borne with pride; their curse, carried with grace – but let it never be forgotten what we have done to Caliban's finest sons. Unending Imperial ambition has not bred warriors with the warm hearts of men, but angels with the cold hearts of weapons.'

No soul so changed will recover what was lost. No weapon so savage can be wielded without cost.'

– *The Verbatim*, Lutherian Amendments,
Chapter I: These Savage Weapons

I

The beast never dies in his dreams.

He watches it slink through the trees, keeping its sinuous body low to the ground, its movements fluid enough to be sickening and boneless. Its ears rake back flat against its head, while its clawed paws are silent on the deep snow. The creature hunts, eager but passionless, its dead cat's eyes glinting with emotionless hunger.

The boy takes the shot, and the shell goes wide.

With the cold air split by the crack of gunfire, the beast twists in the snow, ghost-light on the ground as it snarls at its attacker. Quivering black spines rise from the denser white fur at its back and neck, an instinctive defensive response. A tail lashes behind the beast in threatening rhythm, coiling and thrashing in time with the boy's own heartbeat.

For a moment he sees what the elder knights all claimed to see – a sight he'd always believed to be the lies of ageing warriors girding their fading legends with false poetry.

Yet there it is in the beast's black eyes, something beneath the raw desire to survive. Recognition stares back at him: a crude intelligence, malicious despite its feral simplicity. The moment shatters as the creature vents its anger. Something between a lion's burbling snarl and a bear's hoarse roar rings out in the cold air between them.

The boy fires again. Three more shots echo through the forest, disturbing the snow bundled on branches above. Shivering fingers seek to reload the primitive pistol, but the beast's sinewy weight pounds into his chest, hurling him away, throwing him down onto the frost. In the same moment the boy hits the ground, he feels the chunky shells scatter from his grip, spilling out onto the snow. The beast's bulk on his back saps his strength as well as his breath. What little air he drags into his abused lungs reeks of the creature's foetid exhalation, and a hot, wet mist of stinking tumour-breath washes over the back of his head. Whatever the beast is, it's rotting from within. Saliva runs in a slick string from the beast's jaws, spattering onto his bare neck.

Corswain swings over his shoulder, hammering the body of his pistol against the beast's skull. Bone gives with a muffled crack, eliciting a whine that's almost feline. As the creature rears in response, the boy scrabbles across the snow, regaining his feet in a staggering run. Steel whispers as it slides from his sheath, a sword almost as long as the boy is tall, clutched in two shivering hands. As the beast stalks closer, he sees the malign hunger in its eyes cool to a feral wariness. It's afraid now, or at least cautious. Flakes of snow drift onto the blade, freezing into diamonds wedded to the steel.

'Come on,' the boy breathes the whispered words. 'Come on...'

The beast leaps, striking his chest with the force of a stallion's kick, and he's down again. This time his sword spins from his grip, stabbing into the snow like a grave marker. The ache in his chest is a dull, creaking crackle, as if his lungs are filled with dry leaves. He knows his ribs are shattered, but there's almost no pain at all.

The boy strains under the creature's weight, his young muscles bunched taut as he struggles to strangle through the thick fur. The spined quills pierce his fingers and the backs of his hands, each one tipped by beads of clear, stinging venom. His hands tremble as the toxins attack his blood.

When he coughs, steaming bile gurgles from his mouth in a bitter rush. The puke hisses onto the snow, eating holes in the frost with acidic eagerness. The boy barely notices his useless hands falling away from the beast's neck, nor how they curl into arthritic claws.

Convulsions wrack his whole body no more than three heartbeats later. The venom has him now. A scream leaves his lips as nothing more than a silent mime.

Slowly, everything starts to whiten, to fade away. He feels himself dragged, body scraping over the snow, but other, truer sounds begin infiltrating his thoughts: the sound of a ticking fan blade in a labouring air filtrator; boot-steps on the deck above; the omnipresent rumble of live engines.

At last, he opens his eyes.

It plays out like this each time he sleeps. The beast never dies in his dreams.

II

His mind wandered during the morning vigil. As Corswain knelt with his brothers, his head bowed against the hilt of his sword, he gave all the appearance of another knight in dutiful reflection of the coming crusade. In truth, he dwelled in memories. His thoughts flew home to a world that hated him.

Caliban.

The name brought a smile to his lips, hidden by the hood that cast his features into shadow. Caliban, that lethal haven of burning summers and vicious winters; where the unending forests permitted no sunlight to fall beneath their boughs, and every ancient tree defended itself with poisonous sap for blood; where every beast hunted with killing talons, mythic agility, or acidic venom. Biting insects spread plagues that left entire settlements silent and lifeless within days. Chittering clouds of locusts descended over the land year after year, annihilating villages and towns in their wake.

Orders of knights shared the grim duty of burning devastated settlements with each yearly cycle around the sun. On Caliban, the number of names inscribed upon the rolls of the dead matched the lists of the newborn. Imperial ledgers coded the world *In Articulo Mortis,* 'at the moment of demise', with the slang tag of 'Death world'. Corswain had laughed when he first saw those words written in an archive.

The scribes' notations damned the world as a worthless globe deserving no further colonisation. It was rendered exempt from paying Imperial tithe even when all other worlds began to suffer such demands from the fledgling usurers of Terra, and pledged itself only to sell its sons into willing slavery in the Emperor's First Legion.

On and on the negative declarations went, citing brutal weather conditions that would affect sensitive orbital communication satellites; continental forests useless for lumber because of the unsafe biochemistry in the world's flora; and screeds of lore decreeing Caliban's fauna among the most predatory yet found on any colonised world – from the lowliest vermin that showed no fear of humankind to the great beasts that mercifully stood on the edge of extinction.

Corswain knew it was all of that and worse. But it was also home, a home he'd not seen in three long decades. A home he no longer believed he would ever see again. His smile in the morning vigil was both secret and bittersweet.

Alajos called to him once the reverence ended. The other knights filed from the chamber of reflection, their white surplice robes not enough to cover the battle scarring that ravaged every suit of black armour.

We have been fighting this war for two years, and I recall each day, each night, every order to draw steel and every shell fired in anger.

Two years. Two years since Horus committed his first act of insanity. Two years since the VIII and I Legions both found themselves ordered into the void, feuding over possession of an entire subsector. Neither side gave ground without taking it back elsewhere. Neither side charged without leaving a vulnerable flank open to assault. Neither Legion lost a battle when their progenitors led them to war.

Two years of civil war. World against world, fleet against fleet, brother against brother.

'Hail,' Alajos greeted him.

Corswain nodded in reply. 'Is something amiss?'

Alajos, like his brothers, wore his full armour beneath a clean surplice. The hood was up, leaving his features in shadow.

'The Lion summons us,' he said.

Corswain checked his weapons. 'Very well.'

III

The lord of the First Legion sat as he so often sat these nights, leaning back in an ornate throne of ivory and obsidian. His elbows rested upon the throne's sculpted arms, while his fingers were steepled before his face, just barely touching his lips. Unblinking eyes, the brutal green of Caliban's forests, stared dead ahead, watching the winking dance of distant stars. Every so often there'd be the slightest betrayal of movement: the rise and fall of his armoured shoulders, or a moment taken to blink and shake his crowned head in silent dismissal.

The warlord's armour was the same rich, unspoiled black as the void into which he stared. Sculpted across his breastplate and greaves, rearing lions formed from red gold – that rarest of metals dredged from the dusty crust of Mars – bared their teeth at a diligent and devoted bridge crew. He wore no helm while he sat in repose, yet the mane of ashen blond locks was bound back in a tight horsetail to keep his face free of distraction, and a simple silver circlet adorned his tanned brow. This last trinket sported no ostentation, being

nothing more than an echo of tradition from the disbanded knightly orders of the Lion's adopted home world. By such simple crowns were the knight-lords of Caliban once known.

Alajos and Corswain approached the throne as one. In perfect unity, they drew their blades and kneeled before their liege. The Lion watched their obeisance with impassive eyes. When he spoke, his voice was the grind of thunder at the horizon – it could never be mistaken for human.

'Rise.'

They rose as commanded, sheathing their swords in twinned movements. Alajos remained hooded, ignoring the bustle of the command deck around them, his hidden eyes focused only on the enthroned warlord. Corswain stood more at ease, arms crossed over his breastplate, his armour enlivened by the thick, white fur pelt draping down his back. The skinned beast's fanged head draped over his shoulder guard, forming the cloak's binding.

'You summoned us, my liege?'

'I did.' The Lion remained seated with his fingers steepled before his lips. 'Two years, little brothers. Two years. I can scarce give it countenance.'

Corswain allowed himself a smile. 'I was thinking the very same thing no more than half an hour ago, my liege. But what causes you to dwell upon it?'

Now the Lion rose, leaving his long blade and helm resting on the throne's arched sides. 'It is not because I share your impatient nature, Cor. I assure you of that.'

Alajos snorted. Corswain grinned.

'Come with me,' the Lion said, his tone neither kind nor cold, and the three warriors moved to the holo-lithic table at the heart of the command chamber. At the Lion's order, a robed servitor triggered the projectors into life, bathing them all in the ethereal green half-light of flickering holo-images. The patchwork display hovering in the air before them showed the suns of the Aegis Subsector, each with their child worlds. Heraldor and Thramas flashed brighter than any other, both systems marked by a messy display of Mechanicum symboliser runes.

Corswain saw nothing new. A long crescent of pulsing red worlds marked the spread of systems locked in open rebellion; these were the worlds existing in defiance of the Imperium, flying the banners of Horus Lupercal and the Mechanicum of Old Mars. Entire solar systems in breach of the Emperor's will, opposing just as many systems crying for Imperial aid and Terran reinforcement.

'Parthac fell earlier this evening,' the Lion gestured to one of the systems ringed by Martian glyphs. 'The Fabricator-Governor of Gulgorahd reported his victory four hours ago.' The primarch's subtle mirth would be invisible to all but his closest kin. 'He was less elated when I informed him that his push to take Parthac left Yaelis open to attack. The rebels took Yaelis less than an hour ago.'

'He overcommitted.' Corswain watched the flashing glyphs before looking to his liege lord. 'Again.'

Alajos spoke before the Lion could reply. 'Did he tender an apology for failing to heed your words when you promised this is exactly what would happen?'

'Of course not.' The Lion leaned on the table, his fists on the smooth surface. 'And that is not why you are here, so spare me the righteous indignation, even if it is fairly placed.'

'Contact with the Imperium?' Alajos let hope filter into his voice.

'No.' The Lion brushed his gauntleted hand through the flickering hololithic image, seeming to drift deeper into his own thoughts. 'No, our astropaths are still rendered mute by the warp's turbulence. I believe the last recorded contact is currently listed as four months and sixteen days ago.' The warlord's cold green eyes never wavered from the holo image. 'Two years of void skirmishes, two years of planetary sieges, two years of global invasions and worldwide retreats, orbital assault and shipboard evacuation... and we have a chance to end it at last.'

Corswain narrowed his eyes. He'd never heard the Lion speak in possibilities before. Always, the primarch spoke with a pragmatist's tongue guided by an analytical mind, his every wartime utterance drenched in logic, with all sides considered before any remark left his lips.

'Curze,' Corswain ventured. 'Have we located Curze, my liege?'

The Lion shook his head. 'My venomous brother,' he gestured to the hololith again, 'has located us.'

The hololith wavered, crackling audibly as it re-tuned to present another image. 'One of our outrider vessels, the *Seraphic Vigil*, received this message from a deep-void beacon left in its patrol path.'

Corswain read the distorted words, silently mouthing them as he did so. They made his skin crawl. 'I don't understand,' he confessed. 'One of the Lutherian Amendments to the *Verbatim*. And an unpopular one, at that. Why leave this for us to find?'

The Lion's murmur of agreement sounder closer to a feral growl. 'To bait us with mockery, using words Curze likely believes are apt. The beacon was set to transmit coordinates in addition to this message. It appears my beloved brother wishes to meet at last.'

'This can only be a trap,' said Alajos.

'Of course,' the Lion agreed easily. 'And yet we will sail into the beast's jaws this once. We cannot spend eternity butchering one another's warriors the way we have these last years. If this crusade is ever to end, my brother and I must face one another.'

'Then continue the hunt,' Alajos insisted. 'We catch their fleets–'

'As often as they catch ours.' The Lion spoke through closed teeth, his armoured shoulders rising and falling with his heavy breath. 'For twenty-six months I have chased him. For twenty-six months, he has fled from me, burning worlds before we arrive, crippling supply routes, annihilating Mechanicum outposts. Every ambush we plan, he slips from our fingers, wriggling away unseen. For every victory we

claim, Curze gifts us with a loss in return. It is not a hunt, Alajos. If a primarch does not fall, this will be war without end. And neither he nor I will fall without death bestowed by a brother's hand.'

'But, my liege–'

'Be silent, Ninth Captain.' The Lion's voice remained measured and low, but cold passion, almost feverish in its intensity, burned in his eyes. 'We are one of the last loyal Legions left at full strength in the Imperium, and we are alone in the void, seeking to hold the entire kingdom together while all other eyes turn to Terra. Do you think I have no desire to stand with Dorn on the battlements of my father's palace? Do you believe I wish to linger here in the silence of space, piecing together the shards of this shattered empire? *We cannot reach Terra*. We tried. We failed. That war is denied to us by the warp's treacherous tides. But the rest of the galaxy is falling dark, and we may be the only living Legion that bears the Emperor's light out here among the stars.'

The Lion straightened again, his eyes still fierce with suppressed emotion. 'That is our duty, Alajos of the Ninth Order. And our Legion has always done its duty. We must win this war. An entire subsector with its forge-worlds bleeding their genius and materiel into surviving, rather than supplying other Imperial forces. The knight worlds do the same, as do the harvest worlds, the host worlds, the ore worlds. The sooner we complete this crusade, the sooner every Imperial sector is bolstered by its efforts, and the sooner we sail to join forces with Guilliman.' He sighed at this last declaration. 'Wherever he may be.'

Corswain remained silent throughout all of this. When the Lion's last words trailed off, leaving the promise hanging in the air, the knight cleared his throat to speak.

'I understand why you will rise to Primarch Curze's bait, my liege. But why did you summon us?'

The Lion exhaled slowly, indicating a world on the hololith at the edge of the Eastern Fringe. 'The coordinates mark this system. I cannot risk the entire Legion fleet abstaining from the crusade on a fraternal whim.' Here, he grinned – a smile nothing like his subtle, sincere smirk. This was a tiger baring its fangs. 'I will take a single company and a handful of warships, with a small support fleet. Enough to repel and evade treachery if it strikes, but not enough to risk losing any ground in this pitiful, eternal deadlock if it is all nothing more than a false trail.'

Alajos saluted immediately. 'The Ninth Order will be honoured to serve as your personal guard, my liege.'

'And I am honoured to be served by them.' The Lion nodded in acknowledgement. 'Cor. You seem thoughtful, little brother.'

'What is this world's name?' Corswain asked.

The Lion consulted the data-screen mounted on his side of the table. 'Tsagualsa. Listed as barren and unsuitable for colonisation, with no evidence of settlement during Old Night.'

'So we are summoned by a blood enemy to a dead rock at the galaxy's edge.' Corswain glanced at Alajos. 'If the entire Night Lord fleet is there, you may cross blades with Sevatar a second time.'

The captain lowered his hood, revealing his devastated face. Most of his ruined visage was marred by lumpen scar tissue and discoloured synthetic flesh that hadn't healed cleanly at the seams. His teeth were blunt steel pegs affixed into reconstructed gums.

'Good.' Alajos narrowed his eyes – practically the only unflawed feature on his face. 'I owe him for this.'

IV

The strike cruiser *Vehemence* translated in-system alone. It burst into the silence of realspace on grinding, protesting engines, braking as it slowed from the warp rupture in its wake. Momentum desistors fired along the ship's prow and central spine, lesser brake-engines howling to slow the warship's forward flight.

In space, it came to a slow crawl in noiseless elegance. On board, the shaking hull coupled with the screaming engines made for a scene altogether less graceful. Hundreds of sweating crew members in the enginarium chambers worked to maintain the immense plasma furnaces, while uniformed officers on the command deck called and demanded status reports from every section of the ship. The Lion's throne on board the *Invincible Reason* was a grander affair than anything on the bridge of the *Vehemence,* and rather than take the captain's position, the Lion allowed Captain Kellendra Vray to ostensibly remain in command of her vessel. While she sat in her smaller throne, her greying hair bound in a severe ponytail, the Lion stood to the side with his arms crossed over his breastplate as he stared at the oculus screen.

Tsagualsa turned in the void before them: grey, bare, granted only the thinnest cloud cover over its visible hemisphere.

Corswain and Alajos stood away from their lord, watching the world themselves. 'Permission to speak freely, my liege.'

The Lion nodded, not taking his eyes from the oculus. 'Granted, Cor.'

'The enemy has summoned us to a purgatorial shithole.'

The Lion's lips curled. To the humans nearby, it was a cold sneer. To his warriors, it was the ghost of amusement. 'I will be sure to include that in the rolls of honour for this campaign. Auspex?'

An officer by the auspex station conferred with the three robed servitors hardwired to the console. He called over to the Lion a moment later. 'The planet reads as lifeless, my lord – a thin atmosphere, tolerable but devoid of any mass life trace. The soil appears to be faintly irradiated, a natural phenomenon. A fleet with Legiones Astartes code returns is stationed in high geocentric orbit on the planet's sunless side.'

'Such literal creatures,' the Lion growled. 'Fleet size? Disposition?'

‘Counting for long-range auspex unreliability and warp echoes, it looks like seven vessels. One cruiser and six support ships, all in abeyance of standard formation protocols.’

The Lion rested his hand on the pommel of his sheathed blade. ‘When our support translates in-system, hold a loose formation on approach. Master of vox-officers, when we are in range, hail the enemy cruiser.’

The Angel fleet, modest as it was, arrived piecemeal over the course of the next three hours. When the final destroyer, *Seventh Son*, drifted into formation with the gathered ships, the *Vehemence* powered up its engines and guided the flotilla closer to the dead world.

‘We’re already being hailed,’ the master of vox-operators called out. ‘Audio only.’

The Lion inclined his head at the man. A moment later, a soft voice breathed over the bridge speakers, flawed by vox-crackle.

‘Well, well, well. Look what stumbled into our system.’

‘I know that voice.’ The Lion’s tone was ice itself. ‘Cease your barking, dog, and tell me where I will find the master that holds your leash.’

‘Is that any way to greet a beloved nephew?’ The soft voice broke away into short chuckle. ‘My master makes ready to walk the surface of the world below, for he expects you to meet with him. To prove our good intentions, our fleet will move out of orbit, beyond the range necessary to fire on the surface. Meanwhile, scan the world yourself. In the northern reaches of the largest western continental plate, you will find the foundations of a fortress. My primarch will meet you there.’

‘This still reeks of an ambush,’ Alajos warned.

The Lion didn’t reply. Instead, he answered the vox-voice. ‘What is to stop me firing on those coordinates from orbit?’

‘By all means, do just that. Commit to whatever course of action it takes to ease your suspicions. When you have ceased panicking and firing into the shadows, please inform me. I will ask my lord to wait until then.’

‘Sevatar.’ Corswain had never heard the Lion pour so much threat into a single name.

‘Yes, uncle?’ the soft voice chuckled again.

‘Tell your master that I will meet him where he wishes. Inform him to limit his honour guard to two warriors, for I will be doing the same.’

The Lion drew a thumb across his throat, signalling the vox-channel’s termination. Those cold eyes turned upon his closest two sons, and he reached for his helm. ‘Alajos. Corswain. Come with me.’

V

He hated doing this.

‘Permission to speak freely, my liege.’

The Lion stood in full armour now, his features masked by the snarling helm with its angular crest of splayed angel wings. The helm’s slanted red eyes emanated disapproval even before the Lion’s rumbling baritone left the speaker-grille.

‘Not this time, Cor. Focus yourself.’ The sword at the Lion’s hip was as tall as a Legiones Astartes warrior in full war plate. The primarch’s left hand rested on its hilt, his posture somewhere between the piratical grace of a gunslinger and the cautious reverence of a knight preparing to pull steel.

Corswain kept his silence, bolter loosely clutched in his hands. The chamber around them was almost devoid of Gothic ornamentation, its ceiling and walls instead given over to the cabled, thudding engineering of Mechanicum teleportation generators. Several of the rattling engine pods vented near-continuous gushes of steam for no reason Corswain could comprehend.

‘Begin,’ the Lion ordered. At the chamber’s edges, cowled tech-menials cranked levers and manned great bronze wheels, turning them on squealing mechanisms. As they worked, each one chanted a different numerical line of a binary cant, like some bizarre mathematical sea shanty.

The engines started to judder, whining as they cycled up to engage. On a raised platform above the flat chamber deck, a choir of nine robed astropaths sang with closed eyes. Their Gregorian chants were at eerie odds with the blurted coding issued forth from the menials.

Corswain truly loathed travelling like this. Seat him down in the deployment bay of a Stormbird gunship screaming through low atmosphere and into the face of enemy fire rising up from the ground, and he wouldn’t think twice. Buckle him into a drop-pod and spit him from the bowels of an orbiting ship to plough into the soil several kilometres below, and he’d do his duty without a whisper of complaint.

But telepor–

VI

–tation was something else.

Even before the flash of white-gold faded, he felt the world’s wind pushing against his armour with weak breaths, strong enough to do no more than tear at his surplice and the oath scroll bound to his shoulder guard. His bolter was up and ready in the seconds it took for his vision to clear of the chemical-scented mist from their teleportation. Artificial thunder from displaced air echoed in his ears, filtered to

tolerable levels by his helm's autosenses.

The aura of coiling mist would've lingered longer but for the breeze. Corswain took a moment to feel the hard earth beneath his boots, to assure himself that he was whole and complete. With teeth gritted and skin crawling, he panned his bolter across the vista before him.

Dusty wind gritted against his visor as his gunsight followed the horizon. They'd materialised in the heart of a crater, spanning at least a kilometre across in all directions. Black stone foundations jutted from the ground – too new to be ruins, they were low walls and pillars that would form the basis of a huge building above. The Night Lords were building something here. A fortress... but the work crews had evidently been withdrawn to make way for this meeting.

Nothing moved. Nothing breathed.

'Clear,' he called, in the same moment Alajos called the same.

The Lion moved to one of the black rock pillars, stroking a gauntleted hand down its sculpted side. Corswain doubted it escaped the primarch's notice that the stone was clearly quarried off-world and brought here for use.

'Do you hear something?' he asked.

Alajos turned to the primarch. 'The wind, my liege.'

Corswain didn't answer at first. Could he hear something beneath the wind clawing at his helm's receptors? Something beyond his own slow breathing and the machine-beat of his pulse tracker at the left edge of his retinal display? With a blink-click, he disabled his active retinal screen.

The world's breath howled on.

'Just the wind, sire.'

'Very well,' the Lion replied. 'Now we wait.'

VII

On the strike of the third minute, a second sonic boom of displaced air heralded the enemy's arrival. Corswain looked into the nexus of spreading mist as the ship's atmosphere teleported down with the enemy dissipated into the wind. His lenses didn't filter out the light fast enough, and in the wake of the transition flare, Corswain had to blink to clear his aching eyes. Tears came unbidden, not from pain or torment, but as the biological response to soothe the irritation.

The Lion anticipated his movements, for he said 'Weapons down, little brothers,' as soon as the knight felt his muscles bunch.

'Yes, my liege,' Alajos murmured, displeasure raw in his tone.

Corswain swallowed his awe at what stood before him. A cadaverous god, in midnight clad, each armoured finger ending in a charged blade the length of a scythe. Black hair at the mercy of the world's winds streamed back from a corpse's face. Chained skulls rattled against war plate etched with runic writing rejoicing in past massacres and celebrating atrocity against the empire of humanity. This husk of nobility, this emaciated wraith now no more than the shadow of a prince, bared teeth filed to fangs as he opened his arms to the Lion, offering a welcoming embrace.

'My brother,' hissed Konrad Curze, Lord of the VIII Legion. His was a viper's smile, just as predatory, just as brazen in its hunger. 'I have missed you.'

The Lion hesitated. He raised his hands to his collar, unlocking the helm's seals hidden there, and pulled the helmet free. An expression of naked surprise marked his features, yet his face was still an angel's countenance – not the beatific, handsome lies of ancient religious myth, but rather the truth of Terran artistry: a face that could've been shaped from tanned marble, emerald eyes with soulful depths, contrasted by a mouth that would forever struggle to show emotion.

To Corswain's eyes, Curze was pathetic, ghoulish, in comparison. A wretched husk facing a knight-lord, claws against a prince's sword.

'Curze?' The Lion asked, his resonant voice softened by disbelief. 'What has happened to you?'

The Night Lord ignored the question, speaking with insincerity rich enough to make Corswain's teeth ache. 'Thank you for coming. How it warms my heart to see you.'

The Lion drew his blade in a slow, clean movement. He neither brought it *en garde*, nor threatened the other primarch. Instead, he clutched it in both black gauntlets, the crosspiece hilt before his face as he stared at Curze above the quillions.

'I will ask you this once and once only: Why did you betray our father?'

'I would ask you something in return, brother,' Curze answered with a grin, his filed teeth on display. The clawed primarch's eyes were unhealthily bright, rich with a secret sickness. 'Why did you not?'

The Lion lowered his blade to end the salute, knightly respects now paid. 'Our father has charged me to take your head back to Terra.'

'Our father said nothing, for he hides within his dungeons, collecting the secrets of the universe and sharing them with no one. Lorgar and Magnus have seen everything our father sought to hide, so do not carry a precious little lie as your shield, Lion. You are Dorn's hound, running here to the Eastern Fringe because he ordered you.' Curze licked his filed teeth. 'Come, brother. Let us at least do one another the service of being honest. I know Dorn.' Here, the Night Lord gave his cadaverous smile again. 'He sent you to do that which

he feared to try himself.'

'I did not come to duel with words, Konrad. I came to end this crusade.'

The Night Lord shook his head, his pallid face grey in the weak moonlight. His lips were the only colour on his visage, and even they were a bloodless blue. 'Speak with me, brother. Listen, reply in kind, and then decide if we must continue this war.'

'You will not sway me with your traitor's tongue.'

Curze nodded, utterly unsurprised. His vile facade cracked for a moment, revealing the warrior he'd once been – perhaps never pure, never free of torment, but capable of emotion beyond this condescending bitterness. The strain lines of pain faded from his brow, and the serpent's sneer left his lips. His voice was still raw, still ruined, but now carried an edge of sorrow. 'I know. So what harm is there in speaking together, this one last time?'

The Lion nodded. 'Wait here,' he ordered his sons. 'I will return soon.'

VIII

The two Night Lords had no need to introduce themselves, for their identities were known throughout the million-strong ranks of the Legiones Astartes. Both wore helms with painted-skull faceplates; both bore armour trophies of oversized skulls and Dark Angel helms hanging from their war plate on bronze chains; and both stood at ease, watching the warriors from the First Legion through red eye lenses. One of them leaned on the haft of a long halberd, a weapon he was renowned for. The other held a bolter at rest, a cloak of black weave draped over one shoulder and down his back.

'You look familiar,' the first warrior spoke. He nodded his head towards Alajos. 'We met at Kruun, did we not?'

Alajos's voice barely rose above a growl. 'Aye. We did.'

'Yes, I recall the moment now.' The Night Lord chuckled whisper-soft, and mimed a two-handed chop with his halberd. The deactivated chainblade atop the spear's haft was over a metre long, grinning with its stilled teeth. 'I'm surprised you survived, Angel. It was careless of me to allow that. How is the face?'

Corswain moved to rest his hand on his brother's bolter. He spoke over their helm-vox, so the Night Lords wouldn't hear. 'Be calm, captain. Don't let him wound you with childish words.'

Alajos nodded. He spoke as Corswain moved away. 'It has healed well. Your flawed carving did sting for several minutes afterwards, though.'

'That's good news. It is wise of you to wear the helm this time, cousin. The last time I saw your face, most of it was a wet ribbon of flayed flesh stuck to the ground by my feet. My brothers in the First Company enjoy the tale, for it was the first time I've ever started to skin an Angel while he was still alive.'

Alajos grunted in reply, his hands fairly twitching with the need to raise his bolter and open fire. 'I will kill you, Sevatar. On my life, I swear it.'

'Cousin, cousin, cousin... I outrank you, do I not? That's *First Captain Sevatar* to you, little Angel.'

'Peace,' Corswain voxed. 'Peace, brother. Vengeance will come, and be all the sweeter for this moment.'

This time, the cloaked warrior spoke. 'You. Angel in the fur. Do you know me?'

Corswain turned to them both. He felt the wind pick up, ruffling the white fur cloak around his shoulders. 'Yes, Sheng. I know you.'

'The skinned animal you wear as a trophy. I've never seen such a thing. What manner of creature is that?'

Corswain grinned. 'It's the beast that never dies in my dreams.'

'Is that some crude Calibanite poetry? We had few poets on our home world, but their works would have made you weep. Our tongue lends itself to melodic prose very gracefully.'

'Nath sihll shah, vor'vorran kalshiel,' Corswain said, in fluent Nostraman. Sheng and Sevatar shared another laugh.

'Your accent is brutal,' Sevatar admitted, 'but that was nicely done. It will be a shame to kill you both when the time comes. You have my oath here, on VIII Legion soil, that we will make trophies from your helms. You deserve nothing less.'

'How comforting,' Corswain chuckled with them. 'I have a question of my own.'

Sevatar performed a mocking little bow. 'We are at your service, cousins.'

'Your gauntlets,' Corswain said, and left it at that.

Sevatar held up his free hand, as he continued to lean on the halberd with the other. The gauntlet was at odds with his midnight armour – where the war plate was deep, dark blue and marked by streaks of lightning, his gauntlets were painted arterial red.

'A mark of shame in our Legion,' the Night Lord's voice still betrayed more amusement than regret. 'A warrior's gauntlets are marked this way when he has failed the primarch gravely enough to warrant death. He will wear the stain of failure on his hands until his execution, at the hour of the primarch's choosing.'

Corswain watched the enemy captain through the filter of retinal target locks. 'A curious custom.'

'Perhaps. But so is hiding your armour beneath cloth robes.'

Corswain felt himself grinning again. 'A knightly tradition from our home world.'

Sevatar nodded. 'This is a gang tradition from ours. The hands of traitors and fools were tattooed red by their families to show them as deathmarked. A sign that no gang or family would tolerate grave failure, but that the condemned still had labours to perform before

they were allowed to die.'

'So which are you, a traitor or a fool?'

The Night Lord's voice revealed his own smile, even if his soulless helm did not. 'Both.'

Alajos was losing his patience. 'Why do you revel with these wretches, brother? And what did you say in their snake-tongue?'

'I told them that I knew they mated with pigs.'

'Madness. Do they have no honour? Why would they laugh at such an insult?'

'Because they are not knights. They possess honour of a kind, it is simply different to ours.'

'Perhaps you should spend less time in the archives learning the tongues and traditions of murderers.' Alajos's tone carried more than a hint of reprimand. It was almost an accusation.

'And what of "knowing one's enemy"? Balance your humours, I am on your side, remember.' Corswain turned to the west as the primarchs stalked back, moving slowly, still speaking in low voices. 'The Lion returns. Be ready.'

Alajos grunted again, his mood too sour to bother with words.

IX

The warriors fell silent as their lords returned – still distant, but close enough to be heard. The Lion acknowledged his warriors with a curt nod. They responded with salutes, forming the sign of the aquila over their tabards. Curze ignored his sons, still addressing his brother.

'Horus himself charged me to speak those words to you,' he said. If the Night Lord had seemed cadaverous before, now he was practically exhumed. The primarch's eyes, with what little white actually showed around the black pupils, were inhumanly bloodshot. His gaunt features were dusted with a faint sheen of cold sweat, and a trickle of dark blood ran from his nose. He wiped it away on the back of his gauntlet. 'Savage weapons, one and all, too dangerous to be wielded without cost. That is all history will see of us. Even you, Lion. Even you.'

The Lion shook his crowned head. 'You underestimate our father's empire.'

'And you overestimate humanity. Look at us. See how we've duelled for the last two years out here in the void. A crusade between two Legions and countless worlds that is still only just beginning. You have chased me for two years, across a hundred battlefields, and why do we meet now? Because I allow it.'

The Lion conceded to that with a slight nod. 'You hide, like vermin fleeing the coming of dawn.'

Curze shrugged, the barest rise of one shoulder guard. 'You will never reach Terra in time to defend it, brother. The warp will not let you. This crusade will not let you. *I* will not let you. Do you think the archives of future generations will look upon you kindly for your absence?'

Curze paused in his diatribe, wiping away a fresh trickle of blood. 'Or will the human descendants of this Imperium look to your legend and whisper of doubt? Will they ask why you were not present to defend the Throneworld, and speak likely lies that perhaps the Lion was not as loyal and true as the mighty, perfect Rogal Dorn? Perhaps the Lion and his Dark Angels waited in the deepest reaches of space, watching, listening, and deciding to join the fight only when an obvious victor emerged.'

The Night Lord's eyes glinted again, with both amusement and sorrow. 'That is your fate, Lion. That is your future.'

'Forgive me, brother.'

Curze tilted his head. 'For what?'

Corswain was watching both primarchs yet still never saw what happened, such was the speed of the Lion's movements. One moment the two brothers were speaking – the Lion's features cast down in contemplation, Curze's eyes fever-bright as he promised an ignoble fate. The next, Curze's features twisted into a taut rictus of pain, blood running between his clenched teeth. The Lion held tight to the grip of his blade, buried to the hilt in his brother's stomach. More than a metre of shining, bloodstained steel thrust from the back of Curze's armour.

'For such a dishonourable blow,' the Lion whispered into Curze's pale, bleeding face. 'I do not care who knows the truth now, tomorrow, or in ten thousand years. Loyalty is its own reward.'

The Lion pulled his sword free. The Night Lord fell back.

At the same moment, the chainblade atop Sevatar's halberd snarled to life.

X

Corswain vaulted a low wall and crouched behind it, taking aim over the top. His visor display realigned, targeting reticule skipping left and right, locking onto nothing. Sevatar and Sheng had vanished as soon as the first blow fell. Alajos and Corswain had raised their weapons, issuing a challenge to empty air. The Lion was already following the retreating, limping Curze, leaving his two warriors behind.

Alajos pinned himself to a pillar now, his breathing coming over the vox. 'I didn't see where they went.'

'Nor I,' Corswain confessed. 'This is Corswain of the Ninth, to the *Vehemence*. Respond, *Vehemence.*'

‘Vray of the *Vehemence*.’ How calm she sounded. Corswain almost laughed.

‘Ware treachery in the heavens,’ he said. ‘We’ve engaged the enemy.’ Corswain caught sight of the Lion through a small forest of pillars, advancing on the retreating Curze, their weapons crashing together several times a second.

‘Do you require a teleportation recall?’ the mortal captain’s reply came back.

Corswain risked another glance over the wall, but saw no sign of Sevatar or Sheng. They’d gone to ground in the foundations of the fortress, out of sight but not out of mind.

‘No. We need to move. You won’t be able to maintain a recall lock.’

Alajos stared around the stone column. ‘Let’s go.’

Corswain followed, keeping low, trusting the wind’s roar to mask the sounds of his boots on the ground.

XI

The primarchs duelled, heedless of their sons’ hunt. The Lion’s blade wove an exquisite dance, while pain acted as Curze’s catalyst. The Night Lord ignored the bloody wound in his belly, letting his arcane genetics quickly seal the injury shut. He fought as he always fought – like a killer backed into a corner. Brutal scythes slashed from their housings on the back of the primarch’s oversized gauntlets, and the air rang with the clash of metal against metal, with the fizzing crack of opposing power fields.

The Lion wrenched his blade back, the silver steel breaking through the air in lashing chops, blurring into a crescent that reflected the moons above. Each carving strike crashed against Curze’s blocking claws. Both warriors moved beyond mortal capability, with speed that defied sight. Yet one was a knight, the other merely a murderer. Curze’s grin was a brittle facade at the best of times. Now it turned to glass.

‘We never sparred, did we?’ the Lion sounded almost bored, his words still carrying over the vox. Every few seconds would see a new cut ripped open in Curze’s armour or slashed across his face. He was fast enough to avoid death at the Lion’s hands, but not skilful enough to flawlessly defend against every attack.

‘I never cared for swords,’ Curze weaved under the carving blade, thrusting out with both claws. The Lion tilted back, his balance executed to preternatural perfection. Curze’s claws shredded the ivory tabard, barely scratching the layered ceramite beneath.

‘There exists nothing of elegance inside you.’ The Lion turned the blade in his hands, parrying another dual-claw strike with his single blade. ‘And nothing of loyalty. For a time, I considered you my truest brother. No others grew untouched by civilisation, only you and I.’

Curze licked his sharpened teeth, eyes narrowed with effort. ‘You should be with us, brother. Even your own Legion senses it. The First Legion’s strife is not unknown to the Warmaster.’

‘There is no strife.’

Their blades locked in that moment, Curze catching the Lion’s sword in the net of his linked claws.

‘No?’ The Night Lord spat the word as a curse. ‘No risk of the fair Angels falling? When did you last walk upon the soil of Caliban, oh proud one?’

The Lion smiled – the first time Curze had ever seen it – but the movement of his brother’s lips still did nothing to warm his statuesque visage. Stone gave off more warmth than that smirk. He gave no answer beyond the smile.

Curze returned it, just as insincere, just as lifeless. In that moment, he stopped fighting, ceased his measured duelling, and leapt at his brother with a howl. Where the warring primarchs had represented the pinnacle of human possibility in warfare, now the Lion’s poise, skill and grace counted for nothing. They brawled as brothers, rolling across the ground, hands at each other’s throats.

When the tumbling ended, Curze knelt atop the Lion. Pinkish saliva sprayed from his pale lips as he bore down on his brother, claws clasped to strangle, to inflict that most slow and intimate of murders, when slayer and slain stare into each other’s eyes.

‘Die,’ Curze breathed. Desperation ruined his voice, rasping it from bleeding lips. *‘You should never have survived that tainted world you call home.’*

The Lion’s armoured hands grasped his brother’s throat in mirror response, but the Night Lord’s advantage was crystal clear. Curze shook the Lion’s neck in his fists, cracking his brother’s head against the rocky ground again and again and again.

‘*Die now, brother. History will be kinder to you this way.’*

XII

He was getting farther ahead, weaving through a forest of stone columns and rockcrete walls, far enough for Alajos to warn him, ‘Caution, brother. We’re being hunted.’

‘Why haven’t you summoned the Ninth Order?’

Alajos grunted in response. ‘I already have. A drop-pod assault will still take seven minutes to reach us.’

Corswain moved to another pillar, his eyes gleaming red and his tabard turned cream in the gloom. ‘I’m going to help the Lion.’

‘Corswain...’ Alajos warned again. ‘He needs none of our help to slay that ghoul.’

‘I saw him go down into the dust.’ Corswain risked another glance. The fortress’s foundations were a forest of stone columns and

walls, and the wind whipping through the crater stole any hope of hearing the Night Lords' armour thrumming.

'What did you see?' Alajos's voice came more hesitantly now, ripe with doubt.

'The revenant leapt at the Lion. They went down into the dust.' Corswain listened to the wind clawing at his helm, muffled to dull buffeting. 'I think I see them. Cover me.'

'Wait!'

He didn't wait. He sprinted through the construction site, falling under fire almost immediately. *Sheng*. It had to be. Corswain weaved through fire from his left, ignoring Alajos's warning cries. Several shells struck home, ripping chunks from his war plate and sending black armour shards cracking against the stone walls. Each detonating shell kicked like a warhorse, knocking him off-balance, but he could focus on nothing but the Lion lying in the dirt, his slack neck in a heretic's grip.

The enemy fire ceased. Alajos was breathless over the vox, 'I'll... kill Sheng.' The audible clashing of blades served as percussion to the words. The captain already battled the Night Lord. 'Behind you!' he threw another warning over the vox.

As Corswain tore closer to the prone figure of his liege lord, the snarl of a chainblade throttling up came from behind. He didn't turn as Sevatar finally made himself known, never breaking the headlong sprint.

'I can outrun him,' he whispered into the vox. The chainspear's growl was already fading. His hearts thudded as hard as a warhorse's hooves on the snowy ground. Around pillars, over low walls, he sprinted and weaved, doing all he could in case Sevatar opened fire.

Behind him, only silence. Over the vox, the crash of blade on blade.

'Brother,' Alajos voxed, 'keep running.' The tone of his voice was enough to make Corswain turn, though he didn't slow down. After vaulting another wall, he looked over his cloaked shoulder just in time to see his captain die.

XIII

Alajos was many things beside his rank of Ninth Captain: a loyal son; a dutiful knight; a gifted tactician; and a warrior with a head for the detailed logistics of planning and organising a crusade force. He was also one of the finest swordsmen in the First Legion, and had once lasted almost a full minute in a spar with his primarch.

He suspected the number of Legiones Astartes warriors capable of besting him numbered fewer than twenty across all the Legions. Ezekyle Abaddon of the traitorous Sons was one; Jubal Khan of the Scars another; and Templar Sigismund of the Fists definitely another.

As was Sevatar. His name joined the others, coursing through both sides of the Imperial Civil War, cheered by some, cursed by others.

Sheng was Nostraman gutter trash – he offered almost no threat at all despite being his primarch's huscarl. When Alajos assured Corswain he would kill the Night Lord, it hadn't been false bravado. He could, and would, do just that. The first clashes of blade on blade told Alajos all he needed to know about the other warrior's form: Sheng was an aggressive killer, seeking to stab rather than chop, dodging rather than blocking. But the tells betrayed him, as they always did to those who knew what to seek. Sheng was slower than Alajos. Weaker. Less experienced. He overbalanced when he dodged. He missed the perfect angle of his blade each time he parried.

Appallingly inelegant swordwork. He'd be dead in minutes. Alajos engaged him and held nothing back, utterly convinced of victory.

When Sevatar finally broke cover behind Corswain, Alajos had whispered his warning. Corswain chose to run on. Sevatar, curse his eyes, chose not to pursue. Alajos had watched Corswain's pounding boots breed more distance between them, while Sevatar stalked back to aid his foul brother, Sheng.

Alajos backed away from them both now, his blade up to guard against Sheng's stabbing sword and Sevatar's grinding halberd. The Night Lords stalked closer, stolen skulls and Dark Angel helms clacking against their ceramite war plate as they dangled on chains.

On a whim, Alajos tore the helm from his head. If this was the end, then by the Emperor's blood, it would be done properly. He raised his blade in salute to them both, ceremonially kissing the hilt as he watched them come closer.

The blade lowered, at the ready.

'I am Alajos,' he told them. 'Captain of the Ninth Order of the First Legion. Brother to all knights, son to one world, sworn to one lord.'

Sevatar lowered his halberd with a lance's intent. The whirring teeth chewed air with a petulant whine. 'I am Sevatar the Condemned,' he growled, 'and I will wear your skin as a cloak before dawn ruins the sky.'

'Come then,' Alajos chuckled, though never in life had he felt less like laughing. They charged as one, a short blade and cutting spear descending in the same moment. The Angel parried, barely, his long sword catching both strikes with awkward grace. All the while he surrendered ground, backing away, drawing the Night Lords with him.

In his own Legion, only two knights had managed to beat him in the sparring circles. One was Astelan, absent these past years from the Great Crusade. The other was Corswain, Paladin of the Ninth Order, bearer of the Mantle of the Champion.

With Alajos's death, he would buy his brother's life.

'Brother,' he voxed, 'keep running.'

XIV

Corswain's retinal display blurred as it refocused. The autosenses obeyed his impulse, tracking the distant movement and zooming to capture Alajos backing away from his attackers. It ended with humiliating speed, despite the captain parrying several strikes in a matter of heartbeats. Even at this distance, Sevatar was a blur of movement in grainy night-vision, his long halberd cutting and chopping, coming closer to digging into the Angel's armour with each strike.

The end came when Sheng's blade plunged into Alajos's thigh, driving the knight down to one knee. The Angel's return cut cleaved through the Night Lord's forearm, chopping the hand – and the sword it held – free. Even as Sheng was staggering back, Sevatar let his blade fall.

Corswain saw his brother's head roll clear of the armoured shoulders, the murder that failed all those months ago finally finished.

He turned and ran again, rounding the final pillar. Alajos's sacrifice bought him precious seconds. He used them to hurl himself onto the primarch's back, driving his sword through the spine of one of the Emperor's sons.

XV

Curze screamed, his ghastly face raised to the sky. More blood drizzled from his pale lips as the insane pressure in his back and chest increased, until his breastplate gave way with a brittle *crack* that split the night. The wounded demigod clutched at the sword tip poking from below his collarbone, screaming like a man doused in chemical fire. More than a shriek of pain, it was an aural assault in itself, sending Corswain staggering back. The knight's grip slipped from his blade – in desperation he clutched at whatever he could reach. One hand fisted in the primarch's lank black hair, the other snagged a thick chain hanging from Curze's pauldron.

The Night Lord primarch staggered to his feet, hauling the struggling warrior up with him. Corswain yanked the primarch's head back, pulling out a fistful of tangled hair, while ripping the bronze chain from the shoulder guard gave him a weapon. Instead of lashing it against the primarch's skull as a whip, he slapped it around Curze's throat, holding tight to both ends. The cold metal garrotte tightened as the Night Lord stumbled and thrashed. Corswain tugged harder, hearing the soft, wet clicks of vertebrae giving way beneath Curze's ragged gasps.

Corswain had broken horses as part of his squire training back on Caliban. Instinct made him tense the first time a horse bucked beneath him, and his rigid muscles had seen him easily thrown from the beast's back. To break a horse, especially the proud and muscled chargers so prized by the home world's knights, required as much grace and care as it did raw strength. The key was to move with the horse, to stay balanced, for the rider to keep his muscles loose and flexible in order to adapt to whatever tricks the creature might try. Corswain hadn't thought of those days in a long time, but the bucking, thrashing ride he endured now brought it all rushing back. He knew he couldn't have been on the primarch's back for more than a handful of seconds, but it already felt like an age.

Curze twisted again, with enough force this time that the Angel lost his grip on the heavy chain. Corswain ended his tumbling fall by crashing against a stone pillar, the impact of his armour plating taking a huge chunk from the dense stone. He'd been shrugged off like a bothersome insect. Even strangled, beaten, bleeding, cut and stabbed, Curze had hurled him aside with almost no effort at all.

He hurt. Blood of the Emperor, he hurt. But he scrambled back to his feet, reaching for his sword in the dirt. If he could–

The shadow fell over him. Something hit – a mountain avalanche against his left side – throwing him back into the air. The ground spun, became the heavens, became both earth and sky at once. Corswain felt himself thudding along the rocky earth until he crashed to a rest against a stone wall.

For a moment, all he could taste and see was dust and blood, blessedly knocked insensitive to the protests of his tormented body.

The dull-witted invulnerability passed all too quickly, leaving him at the mercy of his injuries. His head was a swollen globe of blunt pain, contained by the helm that prevented his skull from coming to pieces. Agony replaced strength in his body; his entire left side felt shattered, literally broken into fragments. When he rose, it was with a scream of spasming effort. Only one leg and one arm obeyed his needs. One shattered eye lens showed a flawed, lagging view of the foundation site. The other showed nothing at all. He was blind in that eye, feeling something hot, wet and useless now occupying the broken socket. Three teeth fell from his lips as he voiced a second scream. They rattled at the base of his helmet.

Through what remained of his vision, he saw his liege lord standing once more. The Lion, a bleeding statue, advanced on Curze with sword in hand. In turn, Curze readied his claws. Several of the talon-blades were broken, scattered over the ground. They came together yet again, weapons sparking and flaring.

Corswain's muscles ached with the sudden influx of chemical stimulants as his armour's internal systems sought to keep him alive. He doubted it would work for long. Something dense and heavy hung in his chest, turning each breath into breathing fire. Something had burst within him, he was certain of it. Acidic spittle ran from his lips, pooling at his sealed collar. He'd drown in his own blood and spit if he didn't get his helm off soon, or at least unseal the mouth-grille.

A figure obstructed his view of the primarchs. A figure with a spear in its hands.

'Not much left of you, is there?' Sevatar chuckled in a low, crackling vox-voice.

'The moons are crying,' Corswain breathed, and crashed down to his knees. His fading eye stared skywards, watching as the moons wept fire.

XVI

The first drop-pod hammered home into a gravel slope, sending ashy stones spraying out in a burst of debris. Heat-shielding on its black hull glowed from the atmospheric descent, while the whining turbines hissed with vented steam. Sealant bolts popped with gunshot cracks, and the pod's sides opened with all the crude grace of a mechanical flower. The Dark Angels emerged with their bolters up and firing.

The second landed cleaner, followed by the third and fourth. All three struck home across the crater, spilling their knights onto the construction site.

'How quickly the tide turns.' Corswain was grinning bloodily behind his helm now. The shadows vanished. Sevatar and Sheng fled as abruptly as they'd descended.

Rattling like hailstones, more drop-pods fell from above. Some were blackened by allegiance, others by the atmospheric fire. Both fleets in orbit disgorged warriors onto the surface, even as they were surely battling in the void. Here on the ground, Corswain could barely see anything at all. He heard the Legions meeting in the skidding clashes of chainblades on ceramite, and the insistent crash of bolters, but saw precious little. With the hand that still obeyed him, he dragged his helmet off, wincing as the cold night air hit his savaged face.

The Lion was in similar ruin, surrounded by his black-clad warriors. Blood sheeted down the back of his head, a liquid cloak down his shoulders. Corswain had no idea how he still lived with so little of his skull intact.

Curze laughed – at least, he began to – before his own warriors began to drag him back just as the Angels dragged the Lion. The two primarchs staggered back from one another, cursing each other above their sons' heads, both hindered by weakened limbs and grievous wounds that made the air stink with their genetically divine blood.

The great sword impaled the ground as it fell from the Angel Lord's grip, while Curze could no longer lift his claws.

Corswain felt himself sliding back down to the ground despite his attempt at moving to the primarch's side. Strong hands pulled at him, hauling him up, forcing him to do what his muscles wouldn't allow. He turned his head, seeing with his good eye.

'Alajos,' he said.

'The captain is dead, Your Grace. It is I, Sergeant Tragan.'

'Sevatar is here. Watch for him. He is here, I swear it. He killed Alajos. I saw it happen.'

'Yes, Your Grace. Come... this way. Thunderhawks are inbound.' Across the vox, he yelled to every surviving soul, *'First Legion, fall back!'*

Corswain limped in his brother's arms, vaguely wondering if he was dying. It felt like it, though never having died before, it was a guess.

'You're not dying, Your Grace,' Sergeant Tragan laughed now. Corswain hadn't realised he was murmuring out loud.

His last vision was of the primarchs, both near driven to their knees, surrounded by growing phalanxes of their armoured sons. Curze reached his claws for the Lion, snarling and cursing, too weak to resist his Legion dragging him from the field. The Lion's reaction was a foul mirror, made all the more hideous because of the warlord's majesty. He screamed oaths from his bleeding, angelic face, pulled back from the battle by his own sons.

Above the battle, he heard Sevatar's cry. *'Death to the False Emperor! Death to his Angels in Black!'* His skin crawled in the wake of those words. Such conviction. Such hate.

'The Thramas Crusade,' Corswain sighed. 'They are right, all of them. This war is just beginning.'

'Your Grace?'

'My sword,' Corswain reached a hand out, as if he could touch the opposing groups of warriors.

'Where is it, Your Grace?'

'Gone,' Corswain closed his remaining eye. 'I left it in a primarch's spine.'

XVII

The beast never dies in his dreams.

He watches it slink through the trees, keeping its sinuous body low to the ground, its movements fluid enough to be sickening and boneless. Its ears rake back flat against its head, while its clawed paws are silent on the deep snow. The creature hunts, eager but passionless, its dead cat's eyes glinting with emotionless hunger.

The boy takes the shot, and the shell goes wide.

With the cold air split by the crack of gunfire, the beast twists in the snow, ghost-light on the ground as it snarls at its attacker. Quivering black spines rise from the denser white fur at its back and neck, an instinctive defensive response. A tail lashes behind the beast in threatening rhythm, coiling and thrashing in time with the boy's own heartbeat.

For a moment he sees what the elder knights all claimed to see – a sight he'd always believed to be the lies of ageing warriors girding their fading legends with false poetry.

Yet there it is in the beast's black eyes, something beneath the raw desire to survive. Recognition stares back at him: a crude

intelligence, malicious despite its feral simplicity. The moment shatters as the creature vents its anger. Something between a lion's burbling snarl and a bear's hoarse roar rings out in the cold air between them.

The boy fires again. Three more shots echo through the forest, disturbing the snow bundled on branches above. Shivering fingers seek to reload the primitive pistol, but his aim was true and his father's pistol sang its killing song. The beast limps now, dragging itself closer in a grotesque, mangled run.

He feels the chunky shells scatter from his grip, spilling out onto the snow. It's too cold to reload with his fingers numbed to raw senselessness. He drops the pistol, too. Not from fear or pain, but because he needs two hands for what will come next.

Steel whispers as it slides from his sheath, a sword almost as long as the boy is tall, clutched in two shivering hands. As the beast stalks closer, he sees the malign hunger in its eyes cool to a feral wariness. It's dying, but that only makes it bolder. Its foul sentience knows it no longer has anything to lose. It hunts now out of malice alone.

Flakes of snow drift onto the blade, freezing into diamonds wedded to the steel.

'Come on,' the boy breathes the whispered words. 'Come on...'

The beast leaps, striking his chest with the force of a stallion's kick, and he's down on his back. The beast weighs as much as a warhorse, its twitching bulk pressing down on the boy's slender body. The ache in his chest is a dull, creaking crackle, as if his lungs are filled with dry leaves. He knows his ribs are shattered, but there's almost no pain at all. Steaming blood courses down the blade and onto his hands.

Finally, the beast ceases its shaking. The boy gathers his strength and counts to three, rolling the stinking creature onto its side. The spines still quiver and leak clear fluid. He's careful not to touch those.

The sword in his hands is bonded to his fingers by a coating of the beast's cooling blood. He lets the blade fall into the snow, and draws the serrated skinning knife from his boot. Birds sing in the branches above, though birdsong on Caliban is never beautiful. Raptors cry challenges at one another, while carrion birds caw for corpse-meat.

Slowly, everything starts to whiten, to fade away as other, truer sounds begin infiltrating his thoughts: the sound of a ticking fan blade in a labouring air filtrator; boot-steps on the deck above; the omnipresent rumble of live engines.

At last, he opens his eyes.

Both of them. Both work. He looks at the harsh illumination globes above, smelling the sharp disinfectant smell of the medicae chambers.

With a pained grunt, Corswain rises and says, 'Water.'

XVIII

His mind wandered during the morning vigil. As Corswain knelt with his brothers, his muscles still stiff with aches and discoloured by bruises, he found the serenity of purposes ever more difficult to attain. His head remained bowed against the hilt of his sword, and he gave all the appearance of another knight in dutiful reflection of the coming crusade. In truth, he dwelled in memories. His thoughts flew back to a world that hated him.

Tsagualsa.

The name brought a sneer to his lips, hidden by the hood that cast his features into shadow. Tsagualsa, a dead world the Night Lords claimed as their own; a world where primarchs had been reduced to screaming brothers, and the foundations of a fortress would one day rise to become an enemy stronghold.

Tragan called to him once the reverence ended. The other knights filed from the chamber of reflection, their white surplice robes not enough the cover the battle scarring that ravaged every suit of black armour.

'Your Grace,' Tragan greeted him as he limped closer.

Corswain smiled in reply. 'You do not need to call me that any more, captain. Is something amiss?'

Tragan, like his brothers, wore his full armour beneath a clean surplice. The hood was down, revealing his strong, aquiline features for all to see.

'The Lion summons us,' he said.

Corswain would've checked his weapons, had they still been at his side. Instead, he nodded. 'Very well.'

XIX

The lord of the First Legion sat as he so often sat these nights, leaning back in his ornate throne of ivory and obsidian. His elbows rested upon the throne's sculpted arms, while his fingers were steepled before his face, just barely touching his lips. Unblinking eyes, the brutal green of Caliban's forests, stared dead ahead, watching the flickering hololith of embattled stars.

Tragan and Corswain approached the throne as one. In a display far from perfect unity, the captain drew his blade and knelt before his liege, while Corswain went down slower – his body still sore, muscles still at odds with his desires. The Lion watched their obeisance with impassive eyes. When he spoke, his voice was the grind of thunder at the horizon – it could never be mistaken for human, and the

pale scar across his tanned throat didn't help humanise his tone.

'Rise.'

They rose as commanded. Corswain stood with muscles taut, arms crossed over his breastplate, his armour enlivened by the thick, white fur pelt draping down his back. The skinned beast's fanged head draped over his shoulder guard, forming the cloak's binding.

'You summoned us, my liege?'

'I did.' The Lion remained seated with his fingers steepled before his lips. 'We have made contact with Imperial forces.'

'Orders?' Corswain asked, feeling his heart beat faster. 'A summons?'

'Neither. We will not abandon the Thramas Crusade until these systems are ours. The Imperium lives and dies by what we do here in the deepest reaches. Defending Terra means nothing if the rest of the empire is ash.'

'I do not understand, sire. What force has made contact with us?'

The Lion shook his crowned head again, watching the hololith. His eyes reflected bright clusters of stars and worlds, while his voice was uncharacteristically soft.

'We have made contact with several of my brothers and their Legions,' he said, 'for the first time since we parted company with the Wolves.'

'Is it the Wolf King, sire?' Corswain made no effort to disguise his reluctance. The Angels and the Wolves had hardly parted on brotherly terms.

'No, Cor. The hail comes from Guilliman and our cousins within the Thirteenth Legion. Knowing we have been unable to reach Terra, it seems the Lord of Ultramar wishes us at his side instead.'

Before the warriors could reply, the Lion narrowed his Calibanite eyes. '*Unending Imperial ambition has not bred warriors with the warm hearts of men, but angels with the cold hearts of weapons.*' He rose from his throne, circling the hololithic table, watching the worlds turn about their suns.

'My sons,' he smiled, though it was utterly without warmth. 'It seems Horus is not the only soul to believe he is heir to the empire.'

About The Authors

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Hailing from Scotland, Graham McNeill worked for over six years as a Games Developer in Games Workshop's Design Studio before taking the plunge to become a full-time writer. Graham's written a host of SF and Fantasy novels and comics, as well as a number of side projects that keep him busy and (mostly) out of trouble. His Horus Heresy novel, *A Thousand Sons*, was a New York Times bestseller and his Time of Legends novel, *Empire*, won the 2010 David Gemmell Legend Award. Graham lives and works in Nottingham and you can keep up to date with where he'll be and what he's working on by visiting his website.

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Chris Wraight

Chris Wraight is a writer of fantasy and science fiction, whose first novel was published in 2008. Since then, he's published books set in the Warhammer Fantasy, Warhammer 40,000 and Stargate: Atlantis universes. He doesn't own a cat, dog, or augmented hamster (which technically disqualifies him from writing for Black Library), but would quite like to own a tortoise one day. He's based in a leafy bit of south-west England, and when not struggling to meet deadlines enjoys running through scenic parts of it.

Gav Thorpe

Prior to becoming a freelance writer, Gav Thorpe worked for Games Workshop as lead background designer, overseeing and contributing to the Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000 worlds. He has written numerous novels and short stories set in the fictional worlds of Games Workshop, including the Time of Legends 'The Sundering' series, the seminal Dark Angels novel *Angels of Darkness*, and the Last Chancers omnibus. He lives in Nottingham, UK, with his mechanical hamster, Dennis.

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Dan Abnett is a novelist and award-winning comic book writer. He has written over thirty-five novels, including the acclaimed

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By contrast, as Head of English at a local secondary school, he spends his days beating (not literally) the same creativity out of the next generation in order to cripple any chance of future competition. He lives off the beaten track in the small city of Lincoln, UK. His first fiction was published
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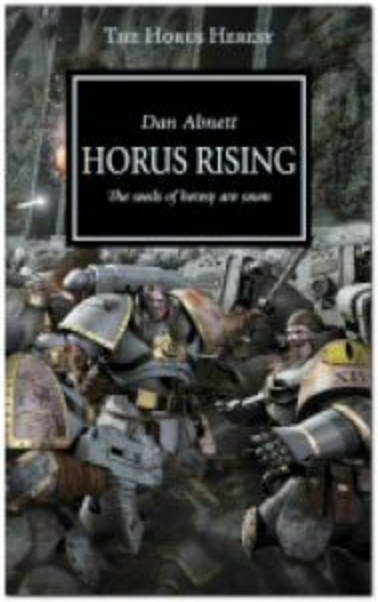

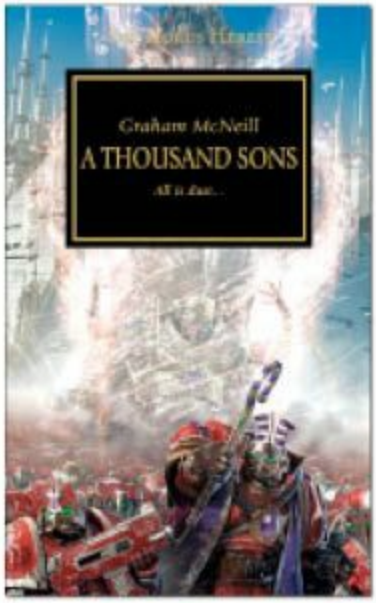

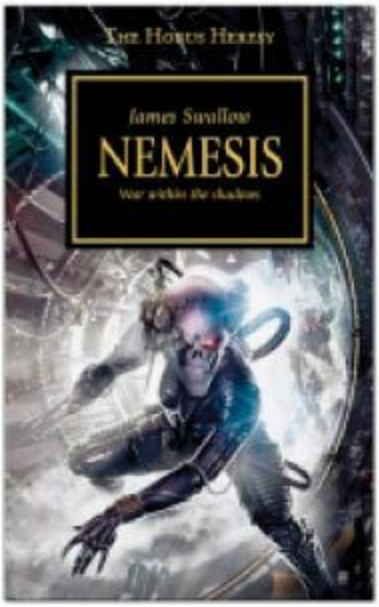

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